

Vol. 3 No. 2

\$2.75

# HARLEQUIN® WORLD'S BEST

# Romances

SOI25  
F B \*\*\* 5-DIGIT 5014  
12249928/0#14 FEB95

A RODGERS  
S BUXTON  
INDIANOLA

Adam's Image  
Body and Soul  
Kiss and Tell  
Season of Dreams

DEBBIE MACOMBER  
JENNIFER GREENE  
SUZANNE CAREY  
ROBIN FRANCIS

FEATURE STORY  
BY DEBBIE MACOMBER!  
PLUS  
3 OTHER BESTSELLING  
AUTHORS!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG  
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



### DEBBIE MACOMBER

Debbie Macomber hails from the state of Washington. As a busy wife and mother of four, she strives to keep her family healthy and happy. As a prolific author of dozens of bestselling romance novels, she strives to keep her readers happy with each new book she writes.

### JENNIFER GREENE

Jennifer Greene has been reading—and writing—stories for as far back as she can remember. Her interest in women and women's problems today led her to contemporary romances. As of November 1992, she has had published forty-two books in the contemporary romance field! Jennifer lives on a centennial farm near Lake Michigan with her husband and two children.



### SUZANNE CAREY

Suzanne Carey is a former reporter and magazine editor who prefers to write romance novels because they add to the sum total of love in the world.

### ROBIN FRANCIS

Robin Francis read hundreds of romance novels before attempting to write one herself and began working on her first book during the 1979 World Series. Robin found her new hobby addicting and has been a happily published author ever since.

HARLEQUIN®  
WORLD'S BEST

*Romances*

From the desk of Candy Lee,  
Managing Editor

Dear Romance Reader:

As autumn swiftly approaches, the days grow shorter, and the nights grow cooler, you can brighten your life with these four warm stories by Debbie Macomber, Jennifer Greene, Suzanne Carey and Robin Francis.

They will take you away to settings as diverse as New York, Chicago, Florida and Oregon. Ranging from a sexy story about a hero chasing a reluctant heroine to a romantic tale about a small-town man and woman who come back home to success--and each other--these stories will gladden your heart.

So put your feet up and enjoy!

Best wishes,

*Candy Lee*

---

112 Tenth Street, P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

**Harlequin World's Best Romances Vol. 3 No. 2**  
© 1993 by Harlequin Enterprises B. V.

All rights reserved.

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Periodicals Inc., 112 Tenth St., Des Moines, IA 50309.

Published by arrangement with Harlequin Enterprises B. V.

All characters in this volume have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

The publisher acknowledges the copyright holders of the originally published full-length works as follows:

Adam's Image © MCMLXXXV by Debbie Macomber

Body and Soul © MCMLXXXVI by Jennifer Greene

Kiss and Tell © MCMLXXXII by Suzanne Carey

Season of Dreams © MCMLXXXV by Robin Francis

® and TM are trademarks of Harlequin Enterprises Limited under license. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Trade Marks Office and in other countries.

Printed in the U.S.A.

**CANDY LEE**  
**MANAGING EDITOR**

**SHELLEY CINNAMON**  
**ART DIRECTOR**

**SYLVIA CARBONE**  
**SUBSCRIPTION MANAGER**

Harlequin World's Best Romances (ISSN 1183-5044) Vol. 3 No. 2 September/October 1993.  
Published six times per year every other month by Harlequin Periodicals Inc., 112 Tenth Street,  
Des Moines, IA 50309. Second Class postage paid at Des Moines, IA, and additional mailing  
offices.

Subscription rates U.S. only: 6 issues—\$10.96. Single-issue rate—\$2.75. Subscriptions not  
available outside the U.S.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Harlequin Periodicals Inc., P.O. Box 11233, Des  
Moines, IA 50340-1233. For subscription orders, changes of address, correspondence con-  
cerning subscription, write Harlequin World's Best Romances, c/o Harlequin Periodicals Inc.,  
P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233. Please enclose latest address label for quickest  
service when writing about subscription.

**HARLEQUIN®**  
**WORLD'S BEST**

**Romances**

**C O N T E N T S**

---

**ADAM'S IMAGE**  
Debbie Macomber  
Page 4



**BODY AND SOUL**  
Jennifer Greene  
Page 44



**KISS AND TELL**  
Suzanne Carey  
Page 83



**SEASON OF DREAMS**  
Robin Francis  
Page 111



# DEBBIE MACOMBER

## Adam's Image



Aloof and somewhat mysterious, Adam's professional detachment could drive any woman crazy. Was he throwing a twist into Susan's well-plotted life?

  
He stood across the room, nursing his drink. Susan Mackenzie found her attention drawn to the tall, rather lanky man despite her first impression that he was strikingly unattractive. His face was too narrow, the chin square and abrupt; the dark brown eyes were friendly, but small. And his ears tended to stick out. But there was a kindness about him that she hadn't seen in a man for a long while.

Susan sat in a corner by herself. Cocktail parties were not her forte, but she had seen to the obligatory chitchat and now was free to sit and observe.

The stranger across the room was an onlooker too. Twice she had watched couples approach him. His smile had been warm and genuine, the sound of his laugh deep, rich and full. Just listening to him had made her want to smile. He gave whomever he was speaking to his full attention. A man who listened, another rarity.

She stood, taking her wineglass with her as she approached him.

"Susan Mackenzie." She held out her hand.

"Adam Gallagher." He shook it firmly.

"Are you a friend of Ralph's?" Susan asked. Ralph, their host, was celebrating the opening of his own literary agency.

"We attended college together," Adam smiled. "Are you in publishing?"

Susan nodded. "Associate editor. And you?"

"No." He shook his head. "I'm a doctor."

The profession fit perfectly with the man, his kindness, the gentle quality about him. He was a healer.

"Do you have a complaint?" he asked ruefully.

"Now that you mention it," she said, "my feet are killing me."

"New shoes?"

She nodded.

"Would you like to sit down?" he suggested.

What she wanted was to go home, but not if it meant missing the opportunity to talk to this intriguing male. She liked him, had liked him almost from the first moment she'd begun observing him. That was unusual.

They sat and talked for an hour. Adam wasn't shy, and somehow she found that surprising. He didn't possess her reasons for blending into the background. Susan's reticence came from a deep-seated shyness that she had struggled most of her life to overcome.

The more they talked, the more attractive Adam became. Less than an hour after she introduced herself, Susan no longer saw the too-

square chin, or the large ears; she saw the man. And he was the most interesting one she had met in two years of living in New York.

Adam paused and glanced at his watch. "My goodness, I've been talking up a blue streak." A scowl touched his brow. "I don't usually do that." He stood. "Would you like a refill?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks."

He examined his own empty glass. "What I'd really like is a cup of coffee. How about you?"

"I doubt that we'll find that around here."

"Sure we will, come on." His hand cupped her elbow as he directed her toward the back of the house, through the small groups that were milling around chatting. At the entrance to the kitchen, he held open the swinging door.

"Betsy will make us a cup of coffee."

A woman of about fifty was preparing a tray of hors d'oeuvres. She turned at the sound of someone intruding on her territory, the blue eyes stormy. But when she recognized Adam, the frown turned to a wide grin.

"Dr. Gallagher," she exclaimed, her voice filled with devotion. "I wondered if you'd come back to see ol' Betsy."

"I couldn't leave without saying hello to my favorite girl, could I?" He gave the older woman a bear hug.

"Oh, be away with you." Betsy laughed. "I suppose you're after a piece of my apple pie again."

"Not this time," Adam said, and moved slowly to Susan's side. He took her hand; the touch, although impersonal, produced a warmth within her.

"Susan and I would like a cup of that marvelous coffee you brew."

No more than a minute passed and they were served mugs of steaming coffee and thick slices of apple pie with hot cinnamon sauce. The pie was delicious.

Adam carried their plates to the sink when they'd finished, and kissed Betsy on the cheek. Lifting the glass coffeepot, he brought it to the table and refilled their cups.

Susan leaned back in the chair and held the mug with both hands.

"Here." Adam sat beside her, and lifted her feet onto his knees. "If you take these off, you'll be able to relax." Carefully he unbuckled the strap and slipped the sandal off her foot. Gently his fingers massaged the toes, the circular motion extending to the arch of her foot. The gentle rotating action was repeated on the other foot.

The ache all but disappeared as a tingling sensation ran up the back of her legs. Susan felt her throat tightening as she struggled not to purr. The featherlight touch was strangely intimate. She lowered her lashes because to look at him would reveal the havoc his touch was playing on her senses.

"Are you asleep?" The question was whispered.

"If I am, I don't want to wake up," she answered, then opened

her eyes to watch his gaze move slowly over her.

"You're very beautiful." He'd stopped massaging her feet. "Those eyes are fantastic."

From any other man it would have sounded like a line. But not from Adam.

"Your hair is the same warm shade as your eyes. I imagine I'm not the first man who's wanted to run his fingers through it."

Their gazes met and held, and for an unbelievable moment Susan felt as if she'd never need to take another breath. It took every dictate of her will to keep from standing and pulling the combs from her hair to allow the long chocolate brown curtain to fall free. Her heart was pounding so loud she was sure he must hear it. His gaze lowered to her generous mouth. He didn't need to voice his thoughts; they were there for her to read.

A dish clanged against the counter, breaking the spell. Adam shifted uneasily. "Want some more coffee?"

Susan shook her head.

"I'll buckle these for you." Leaning over, he slipped one sandal onto her foot.

"You make me feel like Cinderella."

"I'm no Prince Charming." His cynical tone surprised her.

"Is something wrong?"

He paused, his mouth a thin line. "No. I'm sorry."

"Adam." Her fingertips gently stroked the angular line of his jaw. "Would you kiss me?"

He caught his breath audibly. "Now? Here?"

A smile tugged at her mouth as she nodded.

His eyes turned a deeper shade of brown as he stood, looking around him.

Susan's gaze followed his. Betsy was busy at the kitchen sink, her back to them. Susan wouldn't have cared if they'd been in the midst of all the guests; all she wanted was to discover what it would be like to taste his mouth.

"Outside." An arm around her waist led her out the back door. Moonlight illuminated the cement patio. Adam slipped his arms around her and brought her against the muscular hardness of his chest. His hold tightened and his mouth moved closer.

Susan linked her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoe. Adam's eyes seemed to burn into hers. The tip of her tongue moistened suddenly dry lips, and with a muted groan, he lowered his mouth to hers.

The kiss was soft and gentle, as if she were as delicate as fine porcelain. Parting her lips in welcome, Susan yielded. A rush of intense pleasure washed over her and left her trembling. The kiss deepened as his hands roamed over her back, arching her closer, as if he wanted to fuse them together for eternity.

When Adam dragged his mouth from hers and buried it against the side of her neck, Susan felt cheated. This shouldn't end. She was on the brink of discovering in

a few short minutes more of what it meant to be a woman than she had in all her twenty-four years.

She was conscious of Adam's body pressing against her and of his uneven breaths. Had he felt it too? Surely he must have....

She gave a small protesting moan as he pulled away. His hands moved to her upper arms.

"You are very kissable," he murmured. "But then, I imagine more than one man has told you that."

Several had, but Susan didn't want to think about anyone or anything except Adam. How could she possibly hope to explain that she felt more wonderful with him than she had with any man...ever?

"Your mouth is equally desirable." Leaning forward slightly, she softly pressed her lips over his.

His hands tightened as if to restrain her, but the tenseness quickly flowed from him. Instead of pushing her away, he gathered her to him, holding her in his embrace. One palm rested over his heart and Susan sighed as she felt the erratic beat. The flame that was blazing within her had touched him too. She couldn't remember feeling more content.

"Susan." Her name had become a gentle caress as he held her, his chin resting on the crown of her head. "We should be getting back," he said.

But neither moved, unwilling to break their embrace.

"Are you cold?" Adam asked as if suddenly conscious that the early-October night might be un-

comfortable on her bare shoulders.

Susan laughed. "Cold? Are you joking?"

Silence stretched between them. The party would be breaking up soon, and although he continued to hold her, Susan could sense him mentally withdrawing. The notion that they would part tonight and she would never see him again tightened the muscles of her abdomen. The thought was intolerable. Yet Adam made no suggestion they meet.

"Can I see you again?" she asked. "Tomorrow?"

"I'm on duty at the hospital in the afternoon." He drew away, dark eyes narrowed on her face.

"Morning's fine. I'm an early riser." Normally she was anything but.

"I've got a soccer game. I coach a team for the Boys' Club." He drew in a deep breath. "Not tomorrow. Maybe sometime next week. I'll give you a call." The softness had left his face.

Stunned for a moment, Susan stared at him, disbelieving. His mood had changed so quickly. "You're giving me the brush-off, aren't you?" She had come on strong, a lot stronger than she did with others. Some men didn't like that.

"I'm not." The way he said it told her he was lying.

Susan took a step in retreat, studying him in the soft moonlight. She saw displeasure in Adam's features. His jaw was

clenched and tight; a muscle twitched beside his eye.

"Don't worry, I get the message. Don't call me, I'll call you." She laughed tightly. "Now if you'll excuse me."

"Of course."

The back door closed. It felt heavy and hard. But so did her heart. Pausing, she glanced out the kitchen window. Adam remained exactly as she'd left him, his shoulders hunched, and she watched as he wiped a weary hand over his face. Some inner turmoil seemed to be troubling him.

"Mighty fine man."

Susan swiveled around. "Pardon?"

Betsy was wiping her hands. "I said Dr. Gallagher is a fine man."

"I'm sure he is." Susan meant that sincerely.

"Not much to look at though." The older woman chuckled, but her eyes seemed to appraise Susan. "That means a lot to some people. My Ben was a good-looker. Biggest mistake of my life, marrying that man. Caused me nothing but heartache."

"Looks aren't everything," Susan agreed. "Thanks for the coffee and pie, Betsy."

The woman's gaze followed her. "Good night, miss."

"DID YOU HAVE a good time last night?" A sleepy, disheveled Rosemary Thomas sauntered into the cozy living room and asked Susan early the next morning. Both worked for Silhouette, Rosemary in the contract department,

and they shared a tiny one-bedroom apartment off east Eighty-eighth Street.

"As good as can be expected." Susan sat sideways on the sofa. She sipped from a steaming mug of coffee.

"Meet anyone?" Rosemary persisted.

Susan's dark eyes widened. "What makes you say that?"

Rosemary shrugged. "I don't know, you look different. Brooding, like you met Mr. Wonderful."

"I've given up on the dream of finding Mr. Wonderful."

"Do my ears deceive me?" said Rosemary. "How can a romance editor forsake Mr. Wonderful?"

"Mr. Wonderful's an illusion," Susan announced. "I'm looking for Mr. Nice Guy."

Rosemary sat in the worn chair covered in the same material as the sofa. "Doing anything this weekend?" she asked.

"No," Susan answered.

"I think I'll head out after breakfast. It's Mom's birthday Wednesday. She'll be disappointed if I don't spend some time with her. You're welcome to come."

With a quick shake of her head, Susan declined the invitation to visit her friend's family in New Jersey. "I've got some proposals I want to go over this weekend." Bringing work home from the office was essential. Working with as many as fifty authors made it impossible to find the time to read all the new material she wanted to at

work. Constant interruptions were part of her job. But one of its most fulfilling aspects was the chance to spot and develop new writing talent.

WEDNESDAY afternoon, Susan did something that shocked her. She phoned the Boys' Club and discovered the youth soccer games were played at nine and ten-thirty on Saturday mornings in Central Park. If she felt like a fool then, she felt more of an idiot the next Saturday as she zipped up a baby blue warmup jacket and headed for the park.

"Why am I doing this?" she repeatedly asked herself. Brilliant fall colors cloaked the avenue. The day was glorious.

The soccer fields were on one end of the Great Lawn. As she approached them, Susan picked out Adam easily. Just watching him, even from this distance, did something to her heart. What was it about this man that had haunted her all week? What had happened that night at Ralph Jordan's party for him to withdraw from her so suddenly? In the beginning she was sure it was because she'd come on so strong. But there had been nothing that evening to indicate that. He had seemed as caught up in this attraction as she. And she had been attracted to Adam Gallagher physically, mentally and spiritually almost from the moment she'd first seen him.

The official's whistle blew, and for a moment Susan thought the game had ended. Instead the play-

ers ran off the field and Adam's boys huddled around him. Adam knelt on one knee in front of the group.

Halftime, she mused, watching from a position camouflaged by trees. The second half of the game was exciting, and Adam's team won. Susan couldn't restrain her sense of pride. Her intention had been to saunter past him casually and act shocked that they had run into one another.

Now she realized she couldn't do it. Turning, she stuck her hands in her pockets and headed toward the sidewalk. She took a deep breath of the autumn air.

"Susan." Someone was shouting her name.

She turned to see Adam running toward her.

If she'd hoped for a friendly greeting, she was in for a disappointment. His eyes were dark and brooding.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, hi. Adam, isn't it?" Susan hoped to give an impression of indifference. "I just happened to be enjoying a walk and stumbled onto the soccer game. You have a good team. Nice day, isn't it?"

"Beautiful." Adam smiled ruefully.

"Well, I won't keep you. I've got some errands to do," she said. "It was good seeing you again. Give Ralph my best." She offered him a weak smile and turned. *He's actually going to let me leave*, her mind screamed.

Without even knowing she would do anything so crazy, Susan

collapsed onto a huge mound of leaves.

"Susan."

Never had she heard such emotion in the sound of her name.

The clamor of running footsteps followed. At precisely the right moment, she turned and threw a huge handful of leaves into his face.

Adam looked stunned. Before he could recover, she stood and tossed more at him.

Susan was laughing harder than she had done in a long time.

Adam stared at her. "What did you do that for?"

"Because I couldn't stand for us to talk to one another like polite strangers," she yelled. Bending down, she scooped up more leaves, but one gentle push toppled her onto the soft pile. She was deluged with leaves as Adam dumped several armloads over her head.

In an effort to escape, she rolled onto her side, kicking up the leaves as she turned. Laughter hindered her movement, and a second later Adam had joined her on the ground, his hands pinning her to the earth.

Her breasts heaving with the effort to breathe evenly, she gazed into the powerful face that had haunted her all week. Amusement glittered from his dark eyes, and the corners of his mouth were quivering. Their looks met, and the world about them seemed to fade into oblivion. The leaves, the sun, the trees were gone, as were the sounds of the city. Adam brushed the hair from the side of

her face. His touch was gentle, sweet. The laughter had left his face as his attention centered on her softly parted lips.

Susan inhaled deeply, anticipating the union of their mouths. He didn't want to kiss her; she could see it in the set of his jaw. But at the same time, he couldn't stop himself. The knowledge thrilled her, and instinctively her arms curved around his back.

The kiss renewed every sensation she had experienced the night they met. Somehow deep inside she'd been hoping it had been the wine or the moonlight. But this was real. So real and wonderful. Magic.

She hadn't realized she'd whispered the word until Adam raised his head. "Magic?" he repeated.

She smiled and nodded.

Adam released her and sat up. He linked his hands around bent knees and stared into the distance.

Susan sat in the same position. "Why?" she murmured softly. There wasn't any need to explain the question.

"I knew someone like you once," he began, but didn't turn to look at her. "Gail was as beautiful as you are."

"Pretty girls are a dime a dozen." She shrugged.

"She had the most incredibly thick auburn hair."

Susan hated her already. "Mine's brown." So he'd been hurt, she thought, probably jilted. None of it had anything to do with her. Unless...unless he had been

pretending he was holding Gail, kissing Gail.

"Are you still in love with her?" she asked.

Adam looked taken aback. "I don't think so. No."

"Well, that's encouraging." She didn't mean to sound ill-mannered, but love's course hadn't been smooth for her either. She didn't know that it was for anyone.

She bounded to her feet, suddenly angry. The one thing Susan thoroughly detested was being confused with someone else, especially if she'd been his one true love. "It was nice seeing you again, Adam. As always, it was an adventure."

He stood too, brushing leaves from his pants.

"The name's Susan, in case you forget. That's S-U-S-A-N. And the hair's dark brown." She weaved her fingers through its length. "And for that matter, I'm not all that beautiful. My nose is a little odd." Pivoting sharply, she strode out of the park. He didn't try to stop her. Somehow she knew he wouldn't.

\*

SUSAN LIFTED her glasses and pinched the corners of her eyes with her thumb and index finger. This job was definitely taking its toll on her eyes. She coughed. Her health too. The little romp in the damp leaves last Saturday had resulted in a horrible cold.

That night, her violent sneezing caught Rosemary's attention.

"You know what you need, don't you?"

If Susan heard about the wonders of vitamin C one more time she thought she'd scream. Her roommate had been on a health-food kick for weeks.

"What you need is to get those endorphins pumping through your body," her friend said forcefully.

Susan shook her head scornfully. "Endorphins? Have you been reading *Intimate Moments* again?"

"I can't believe anyone can graduate from Cornell and not know what endorphins are."

Susan sneezed again. Her throat ached and her eyes were beginning to water. "All right, tell me all about it." She might as well capitulate. From the look in her eye, Rosemary would tell her anyway.

"Endorphins are a secretion your body produces that gives you a natural high, both physical and mental. So exercising will actually make you feel good. That's why I've started to walk to work."

For over a month Rosemary had trekked the two and a half miles to the Avenue of the Americas every weekday morning. Susan had scoffed, but her friend was as fit as an Olympic runner, while she felt steps away from missing a week's work.

She sat on the sofa. "I feel awful," she admitted.

"Scratchy sore throat? Eyes burning? Ears plugged?" Rosemary questioned softly.

Susan nodded. "I think my chest is tightening up too."

"I can help," Rosemary said.  
"But you have to trust me."

A half hour later Susan couldn't believe what was happening. Rosemary had her change into pajamas and housecoat. Then she'd hung a huge head of garlic around her neck and applied a mustard plaster to her chest.

"This better work, Rosemary. That's all I can say."

"Trust me," she declared, leading Susan into the bathroom.

"There's more?" she protested loudly.

"Sit," Rosemary ordered, and helped lower her onto the edge of the bathtub. She fetched a steaming bucket of water. Immediately the small room was filled with the scent of lemons and spice. At least it helped kill the garlic odor.

"Lean forward," Rosemary instructed. "Breathe in as much of this as possible." She draped a thick towel over Susan's head.

"How long do I have to sit like this?" The words sounded muffled even to her own ears.

"I don't know. Let me check the book again. Keep your head down until I get back," said Rosemary.

"Wonderful, just wonderful," Susan muttered, breathing in the citrus-scented steam.

Somewhere in the distance she heard a buzzer. It sounded as if it had come from the stove in the kitchen.

"Susan, it's for you."

She lifted her head and peered out. "What's for me?"

"The door."

"The door?" she repeated, and her heart leaped to her throat. Adam Gallagher was standing directly behind Rosemary.

"Hello, Susan. It's Adam, spelled A-D-A-M."

Immediately Susan lowered her head, hiding under the towel. "Rosemary," she shouted, "do something."

"I didn't know he was following me," Rosemary said. "I thought he'd sit down."

"I should have," said Adam, a smile in his voice. "But I confess to being curious about a certain smell that seemed to be coming from this room."

"Would you two mind leaving?" Susan screamed, and seethed silently. At the sound of the door closing, she ripped the garlic from her throat and let the towel fall to the floor.

Dear heaven, she'd never be able to look Adam in the eye again. How would she ever live this down?

AS MUCH AS Susan hated to admit it, she felt much better the next morning. Rosemary had already left for work, but there was a note for Susan beside the coffeepot: "Hope you feel better. Adam wanted me to ask if you'd meet him tonight, six o'clock at Tastings for a drink. I would have said something last night, but I didn't think you'd talk to me. I don't blame you. Hope to see you later. Rosie."

Susan crumpled the note and tossed it into the garbage can.

Every encounter she'd had with Dr. Adam Gallagher had been disastrous. She wouldn't go.

By the time she broke for lunch, Susan had decided she was behaving childishly. Of course she'd meet Adam.

At five-thirty, she cleared her desk, or as much of it as she could. There seemed to be a sense of never really being finished. If she didn't love the work and New York, her job could have depressed her. Instead she was challenged.

No, she wouldn't meet him. What was the use? Her thoughts were muddled. Her heart was telling her she should meet Adam. But the more practical part of her personality was issuing repeated warnings.

Without admitting to herself that she would or wouldn't accept the invitation, Susan strolled toward Tastings, a popular restaurant six blocks up the street. She preferred to think that she was leaving her options open. At any time she could turn around and head home.

Adam was arriving just as she got there. Walking toward her with a wide grin that was directed at her alone. And like a magnet drawn to steel, she returned his warm greeting with a smile of her own.

"Hello, Susan."

"Adam." She couldn't look away. He really was plain looking. He was tall but muscular, and his wide shoulders narrowed to lean hips and long, long legs. Plain, but

compelling in a way she couldn't describe.

"I see you're feeling better," he said with a smile.

Susan flushed. "Yes, much better. Thank you."

A low chuckle rumbled from his throat. "The wonders of modern medicine never cease to amaze me."

"Adam Gallagher, if you mention one word about last night, I'll leave."

A large hand cupped her elbow as a smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. "No more, I promise."

Tastings was a long and narrow room with emerald green tablecloths on the square tables. One wall contained a huge wood bar with upholstered stools. It was a popular place to meet for drinks. Although it was early evening, the room was nearly filled. Adam found an empty table and helped her out of her coat. A waitress took their order and soon returned with Susan's Cabernet Sauvignon and Adam's Beaujolais.

Adam cupped his glass. His shoulders were hunched forward slightly, and Susan asked, "Tired?"

He nodded. "But it's not the company I keep." His gaze rose to meet hers. "The stork got me out of bed this morning about four. A beautiful baby girl, but the mother had a difficult labor and I wanted to be with her. Her husband left her, and she was alone and needed someone. By the time I finished

there, it was time to go to the office."

"We can make it another time if you'd rather," Susan offered.

"No." He reached across the table and squeezed her fingers. "In fact, I don't know about you, but I'm starved. I'm not dressed for anything fancy, but I know where we could find a decent meal."

Susan nodded, pleased at the invitation.

He took her to a small restaurant near Times Square that served charcoal-broiled hamburgers and fresh-baked bread. The owner shook hands with Adam and personally escorted them to a booth.

Adam introduced Susan, and Ambrose Lockridge shook her hand. He wouldn't allow them to order from the menu, insisting he would personally cook the specialty of the house in their honor.

Ambrose delivered hamburgers that looked as tall as the Empire State Building. Melted cheese, sliced pickles, thick slices of tomato, lettuce and a sauce oozed from the sides of the buns. The meat patty alone must have weighed half a pound. One person couldn't possibly manage to eat the entire hamburger.

Susan did her best, downing almost half. Again she discovered how much she liked Adam. He talked for a long time, telling her about his office and the decision to go into family practice. Not until they finished their meal did he mention Saturday morning. "I feel I owe you an explanation."

Taking a sip from her coffee cup, Susan avoided looking at him. She didn't want to hear about Gail.

"You don't owe me anything, Adam," she said. "I got the picture from what you said Saturday."

"I'm sure you thought exactly the wrong thing," he contradicted. "I wasn't comparing you to Gail, although there are striking similarities."

"I doubt that." Susan took another sip of coffee.

"I like you, Susan."

He was saying so much more. Susan wished she knew exactly what. She set the cup down. "I like you too."

Again his gaze settled on her face. "You're a beautiful woman, and I'm not exactly a knight in shining armor."

"I'm not Lady Diana, either," she countered. With any other man her attractiveness would have been an asset. But not with Adam.

"You're prettier than royalty. Prettier than Gail."

Susan felt as if her heart would burst. "Did this...other woman hurt you so much that you can't trust again?"

"Gail," he said. "I loved her very much. But I was young and stupid."

Susan had never felt such intense dislike for someone. "What happened?" she asked.

"We met when I was in med school."

That long ago! Susan thought with a sense of frustration. Adam had to be thirty-four, maybe thirty-

five. He had loved Gail all these years?

"There's not much to say except that we fell in love. I fell in love," he corrected. "Gail fell for dollar signs she was sure were in my future. I should have known a beautiful, popular girl like Gail couldn't really love someone like me."

Susan had to swallow back words so as not to interrupt him. It had been on the tip of her tongue to say she was half in love with him already.

"At the end of my first year we got engaged. A couple of months later my father became seriously ill and I decided to discontinue my studies and help out at home until Dad was better. Gail opposed my leaving school. We had a bitter argument.

"Anyway," Adam continued, "I did go home, and my father died a couple of weeks later. By the time I returned to school, Gail was engaged to another medical student."

"And you still care about her?"

"No. But a man doesn't easily forget his first love."

They'd been lovers. The thought was unbearable.

"How can Gail and I possibly be alike?" asked Susan.

"In addition to being beautiful, you both have the tendency to go after what you want."

Susan released an inward groan. She knew it! They had gotten off to a bad start. If Adam only knew how extraordinary such behavior was for her. Never, she promised

herself, would she instigate anything with him again.

"I'm not like her, Adam. But you'll have to discover that yourself." She reached for her purse. "I should be going. Thanks for the drink and dinner," she murmured.

Adam paused to place some money on the table before following her outside. She heard him call something to Ambrose.

A hand on her shoulder halted her progress as she moved to wave down a taxi. "Just a minute." Adam said. "I've offended you, haven't I? That wasn't my intention."

Susan already knew that. Adam would never knowingly hurt anyone. "I'm sure it wasn't," she replied.

"When you're in my arms, Susan, I can think of little else."

Well, she certainly hoped so! She looked down the street. Where were the taxis when she needed one?

The pressure of his hands turned her around. His eyes were smiling into hers. Slowly he lowered his mouth to claim hers in a gentle but surprisingly ardent kiss.

Susan melted into his arms as he wrapped her in his embrace. A soft, involuntary moan came when he lifted his head, but he quickly lowered it again, parting her lips with a plundering kiss that sent the world in a tailspin.

Susan buried her face in his light jacket and sighed unevenly. Adam's mouth was pressed against the top of her head.

A taxi pulled to the curb. "You looking for a ride?"

"Yes," Adam answered for her and held the door open.

"Good night, Susan."

She pressed her fingers to her lips and waved a goodbye. Not until she was almost home did Susan realize that Adam had not mentioned seeing her again.

SUSAN OFFERED Jack Persico an apologetic smile. The evening had been a waste. What was the matter with her? Couldn't she have fun anymore? Why should her life hinge on whether she heard from Adam again? She hadn't, and for over two weeks now, she'd lived and breathed anticipation.

"I had a nice time. Thanks, Jack," she murmured.

"Little liar," he said. "What's wrong? Problems at the office?"

Shaking her head, she turned and inserted her key into the lock. "I hope you aren't offended if I don't invite you in, but I really am tired."

"I understand," he told her gently, and in a strange way Susan was sure he did. He gave her a knowing smile and kissed her lightly. "I'll give you a call later."

"Thanks, Jack." She let herself into the silent apartment. Rosemary had gone out after all, she mused. Friday night and Susan had turned down two invitations, hoping to hear from Adam. When she didn't, she accepted Jack's casual offer for a movie. Releasing a low, uneven breath, she hung up her coat.

Just as she closed the closet door, Rosemary came out of the bathroom, her face covered with a green goo.

"Oh, you're back. How was the movie?"

"Great. Any phone calls?"

"One. He didn't leave his name."

Susan's heartbeat nearly tripped over itself. Adam! "Was there a message?"

"No, he said he'd call back later."

"When did he call?"

"About an hour ago," Rosemary mumbled as the facial plaster began to slip. "But I don't think it was your doctor friend. This guy's voice was different."

"Oh," she whispered. "What's that on your face?"

"Avocados." Rosemary returned to the bathroom.

THE CLOCK RADIO went off early the next morning. Susan fumbled with the switch that killed the music. One eye fluttered open to note the time—seven fifty-five. Perhaps that had been Adam phoning last night. Then it'd be entirely proper for her to contact him in return. And since an early-morning walk in Central Park would be good for her health, there was no better time than Saturday morning. If she just happened to run into Adam coaching his soccer team, then that would be the perfect time to ask.

Slipping out of bed, she grabbed jeans and a sweater and walked into the bathroom. With luck she

could be out the door before Rosemary knew she was gone.

Forty-five minutes later, fortified with several cups of strong coffee, Susan let herself out. One look at the threatening dark sky and she cringed. Only for Adam; there wasn't another reason on earth she'd be out this early on a Saturday morning.

Hoping to look as casual as possible, she strolled to the field and stood on the sideline. Her toe played with the chalk line. When she glanced up, her eyes met Adam's. She knew hers were a little apprehensive, but her doubts quickly faded at the welcome in his.

He shouted something to one of the boys, who ran forward and took his place as he trotted to her side.

"Hi."

"Morning." She glanced away, fearing he'd read her eagerness.

"I was hoping you'd come."

He was hoping she'd come! For two miserable weeks she'd heard nothing from him. She shot him an angry glare.

Surprise flickered over his face. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing," she lied. "I got a phone call last night. Rosemary said she thought it might have been you."

"No," he said casually, "it wasn't me."

Inhaling deeply, she hoped to calm herself and fight off the attack of indignation. "It seemed like such a nice morning for a walk. I didn't mean to intrude."

"You're not," he assured her quickly, and exhaled a slow breath. "Are you always this beautiful in the morning?"

Beautiful! She'd barely worn any makeup, just a light application of lip gloss. Her hair was brushed away from her face and held in place with two barrettes. Struggling for a witty reply, she murmured, "You should see me before I've downed two cups of coffee."

"I'd like that very much."

The words were issued so softly that Susan wasn't sure he'd said anything. But the way her heart somersaulted into her throat assured her she hadn't imagined it. But now his gaze was directed onto the field.

"We're going to need lots of encouragement today. We're playing the first-place team."

"Terrific," she said, beaming. "I'll have you know I was a high-school cheerleader. Let's win this game."

Chuckling, Adam ran back onto the field.

The game was clearly a defensive one, and neither team had scored by halftime.

Like an anxious parent, Adam moved up and down the sidelines. Susan was convinced he'd forgotten she was there until one boy weaved the ball through the defenders and kicked it past the goalie, scoring for the first time. Before she knew what was happening, Adam's arms shot around her waist and she was lifted from the ground and swung around.

Happiness gleamed from his eyes, and it was all Susan could do not to throw her arms around his neck and kiss him.

The final score was one to nothing, and the boys left the field triumphantly waving their hands high above their heads and shouting their glee.

"Congratulations, coach," Susan said with a warm smile when Adam joined her.

"That's thanks to you cheering," he said with a happy laugh. A hand on her shoulder brought her close. "Have you had anything to eat? I'm starved."

"Me too."

"What would you like? The sky's the limit."

"Anything I like?" she asked, her voice low and seductive. "For openers," she said, "I'd like to know why you haven't called me. Following an acceptable excuse, I want you to find a secluded corner and kiss me before I do something rash. And lastly, I'd like the assurance another two weeks aren't going to pass before I'm forced into making an excuse to see you."

Something unreadable flickered in his eyes, and his mouth thinned into a hard line. Susan groaned inwardly, knowing that she had displeased him again. When would she stop making a fool of herself? Fiery color stained her cheeks.

Dropping her gaze, she stepped aside. "On second thought, a hot dog with mustard would do."

"But not for me," he murmured thickly. Fingers pressing the back of her waist, he directed her

to a small stand of trees. Before she could say anything, he took her in his arms. With his hands looped easily around her trim waist, his eyes, serious and dark, met hers. As if in slow motion, he lowered his mouth to hers. An eternity passed before his lips found hers in a kiss that told her everything she needed to know.

As she linked her arms around his neck, her breath became ragged. One kiss and her senses were inflamed. "Two weeks," she moaned. "Why did you make me wait that long?"

"I don't know," he whispered against her hair and then his mouth crashed down a second time. The intensity stole her breath, and her knees threatened to buckle.

"Now for that hot dog," he whispered, and brushed his chin and jaw across the creamy smoothness of her cheek. "There's a place not far from here we can walk to if you don't mind."

"I don't," she assured him. Not when he had his arm around her; not when she felt as if she were walking on air.

As they strolled out of the park they met a vendor with a red cart selling giant pretzels. "Want one?" Adam asked. "They come with mustard," he added.

"Sure." Susan was surprised that they were still warm. "Hey, these are good."

"You mean you've never had one of these?"

"To be honest, I've lived in New York two years and you wouldn't

believe the things I haven't done." They continued strolling down Fifth Avenue with no clear destination. "There's one thing I've wanted to do. I mean, we don't have these things in Oregon."

"What?" He threw her a curious gaze.

"Subways. You're talking to a girl born and raised in Tillamook, Oregon. I thought I'd hit the big time at Ithaca."

"You attended Cornell?"

"Why are you so surprised? I'm not an airhead."

"I know that." He took her hand and squeezed it. "Come on, I've got a gun permit. You'll be safe."

An entrance to the underground station was three blocks east. Adam paid for their tokens while Susan stared at the green walls littered with graffiti.

A roaring sound filled the tunnel as the huge metal monster soared into view. Susan took an unconscious step closer to Adam. The roar dissipated into a swishing hiss and came to a stop. Steel doors glided open and people filed out. Susan and Adam waited until there was a clear path before hurrying inside. There was no seating available, so Susan kept her balance by clasping a steel pole. Adam's arm was wrapped around her waist.

He had never held her this close for so long, and she couldn't help but marvel at the power he had over her senses. Everything about the day held a glorious promise.

"We get off here," he told her as the train halted a second time.

"What did you think?" he asked, once they reached the street.

Susan shrugged. "I'm not sure. I do know I'm going to appreciate those surly cabdrivers a little more next time."

They'd walked several blocks before she asked, "Are you going to tell me where we're going or not?"

"You'll see."

Adam directed her into a multi-story building on the next block, led her into the elevator and pushed the button indicating the tenth floor.

She ventured a guess. "Your apartment?"

He feigned shock. "We hardly know one another."

"Your office?"

"The girl's a marvel," he issued softly. His mouth curved into a tantalizing smile. "There's someone I want you to meet. But before I go to the hospital I've got to change clothes, and here is closer than my apartment. You don't mind waiting?"

"Of course not, but, Adam . . ." She hesitated. "I'm not really dressed to be meeting people."

"No one's going to look past that gorgeous face to notice." Placing a hand on both shoulders, he brought her close. "I don't make many promises, but that's one I have no qualms about." He kissed her lightly.

He brought her into his private office, then left to change in an examination room. She paused to

read the framed degrees and certificates. Of more interest was a bulletin board in the reception room with pictures of babies he'd delivered and several thank-you notes from children. A proud smile softly curved up the edges of her mouth.

"I told you that wouldn't take long," he said from behind her. He was dressed in a thick Irish cable-knit sweater and dark slacks.

Smiling, she held her arm out to him. "Now I look like something the cat dragged in. I wish you'd said something. I hate to meet anyone looking like this."

An arm around her shoulders firmly guided her out of the office. He paused to lock the door, placing a plain brown bag under his arm as he did so.

"To be honest, I don't think Joey will notice."

"Joey?"

"A leukemia patient of mine. He's going home today, after a long stay at the hospital. Poor fellow's been through quite a bit, and I wanted to stop in and see him before he's released. Interested?"

From the look in his eye Susan realized this was someone Adam cared about deeply. "You bet." No doubt Joey worshiped his doctor. "If I ever get sick, can I make an appointment?" The question was asked in a teasing tone, but with an underlying note of seriousness.

The hesitation was enough to make Susan edgy.

"Of course," he said at last.

The hospital was only three short blocks from his office. Adam

was cornered almost at once by a nurse, who engaged him in a series of questions.

Ten minutes later he directed Susan to the nine-year-old's room.

"Hi, Joey."

"Dr. Gallagher." The youth smiled, sitting up in bed. He was dressed in *Star Wars* pajamas, and a watchman's cap adorned his bald head. Blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

"This is my friend, Susan Mackenzie," Adam introduced, curving an arm around her shoulders.

"Hi, Susan." Joey grinned at Adam. "She's real pretty."

"Congratulations, Joey. Dr. Gallagher tells me you're going to be released today."

"Honest?" Excitement vibrated through the boy.

"Seems that way," Adam admitted.

"Yippee," Joey shouted, and threw his cap in the air.

"Remember what we talked about before you had the chemotherapy?" Adam's eyes turned serious.

"I remember," the boy mumbled, glancing away. "I know I wasn't as good as I should have been, but I tried real hard."

"I know you did. So I contacted a friend of mine. He wanted me to give you this." Opening the bag, Adam took out a baseball and handed it to Joey.

"Dave Winfield signed this?"

"I think he might have put your name on it too."

"Wow." The one word was barely above a whisper.

"The rest of the Yankees asked me to give you this." Adam produced a leather mitt covered with autographs.

"Everyone on the whole team?" Joey asked in awe.

"It seems they don't often hear about boys as brave as you."

Joey threw his arms around Adam's neck. "You've got to be the best doctor in the whole world."

SOMETIME LATER Susan sat across from Adam at a small Italian restaurant.

"How'd you manage the autographed baseball and mitt?"

"Don't ask. I owe so many people favors for that one, I may be giving free exams until the year 2000."

"You don't know Dave Winfield?"

"Heavens no." He chuckled.

"You really love that little boy, don't you?"

"I do. There aren't many people I admire more."

"Is he going to make it?"

"Yes." The lone word was issued forcefully, as if the strength of Adam's will would be enough to heal him. "What would you like to order?"

Susan realized he didn't want her to question him about the boy. "The lasagna," she said, and Adam ordered two of the same.

Everything was delicious, but when their dishes were cleared

away, Susan glanced at her watch and sighed.

"What's wrong?" Adam asked.

"I've got to get home. I didn't even tell Rosemary I was going to be gone. We're supposed to attend a party this afternoon." Replacing her cup in the saucer, she glanced at Adam. He seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. She glanced down.

"Susan." Her name was spoken softly. "There's another game next Saturday. Would you like to come?"

"Adam Gallagher," she cried. "I could kiss you."

\*

THE ALARM rang early Saturday morning, and Susan threw back the covers. A quick glance out the bedroom window revealed heavy clouds and a good possibility of rain. Instead of taking her leather jacket, she pulled on a beige raincoat and matching cloche. In twenty-four years she couldn't remember having been happier, and it was all because she was on her way to Adam.

By the time she entered the park, a light sprinkle was dotting the ground. Brisk steps carried her to the soccer fields. But there was no one else around. Had the game been canceled? Looking around, she noted a tall male figure walking toward her. He waved and she returned the gesture.

"Morning," she greeted cheerfully. "What happened?" Tiny waves of pleasure pulsed through her at the raw, virile sight he pre-

sented. He wore a tweed jacket and dark slacks, and Susan couldn't remember a time he looked more enticingly masculine.

"The other team forfeited the game."

"Oh." She tried to disguise her disappointment.

Adam placed a hand along the side of her neck and tilted her head back with the subtle pressure of one finger.

Susan's breath became shallow. Anticipating his kiss, she parted her mouth willingly and slipped her arms around his neck. The kiss lingered as if they were both unwilling for the intimacy to end. When he buried his face against the slim column of her neck, Susan moaned, not wanting him to stop. One kiss and the whole crazy world took a tailspin.

Susan dropped her hands just in time to see several runners jog past. "They jog in packs now?"

"Do I detect a sarcastic note?" Adam asked fighting a smile. "Don't be so hard on us."

"Us?"

"Sure, I'm a runner. I thought you knew."

"No," she said. "When do you run?"

"Weekdays right here in the park. I usually follow the same route as everyone else. Two and a half miles is all I have time for, but I love it."

Susan's mind was buzzing. Perhaps Rosemary wasn't so crazy after all. Maybe it was time she joined the physical fitness craze.

"You look a million miles away."

"Oh, sorry." She snapped out of her private thoughts.

"I guess I forgot to tell you today's game was the last one of the season."

Disappointment washed over her. "Yes, I guess you did. Do you coach anything else?"

He flashed her a brief smile. "Only soccer. I don't have time for anything else."

Was he saying he didn't have time for her either?

"Are you going to treat me to a decent breakfast?"

"I imagine that could be arranged."

"FIRST THING we're going to do is take you to the health-food store. Fred will set you up on a vitamin program." Rosemary's eyes gleamed with enthusiasm.

"I want to start running. Not once did I mention taking vitamins."

Rosemary sighed. "You've got to learn to trust me, Susan. Without the proper vitamin fortification, you could be sick within a week."

"How much is this going to cost?" Susan demanded. She had already spent fifty dollars for a turquoise running suit.

"Does your health have a price?"

"This month, yes," she returned forcefully.

"Okay, okay. We'll start with the bare essentials." Rosemary was

in her glory, believing Susan to be her first convert.

When the first alarm rang early Monday morning, Susan rolled over, assured of another hour of sleep.

"Susan," Rosemary's voice broke into her dream. "Time to get up."

"No, it's not," she mumbled. "If you're going to become physically fit, the best way to start is with walking."

Twenty minutes later, Susan stared at Rosemary, who had completed one hundred and fifty sit-ups to her own fifteen.

"How do you feel?" Rosemary shouted, hands on her hips as she lifted her knees while running in place.

"Like I should quit while I'm ahead."

"That's probably not a bad idea. Don't make the mistake of doing too much at once."

"How long before I'll be ready to jog?"

"Depends on how far you want to go."

She shrugged. "I don't know, two miles, two and a half."

"That'll take weeks."

"Weeks?" Susan cried. She couldn't wait that long. True to character, Adam hadn't set a time to see her again. "I've got to be able to hit the streets faster than that."

"I don't suppose this has anything to do with Adam?"

"What makes you ask?"

Wiping her face with a hand towel, Rosemary said, "I know

you. I've seen men come and go. But I've never seen you act like this."

"I've never felt this strong about anyone else. And I learned last week that Adam's a runner."

A look of understanding flashed over Rosemary's face. "Ah, now I get the picture."

A week later, Susan was almost desperate. It'd been ten days since she'd last seen Adam, and she hadn't heard a word from him. But Rosemary had devised a workout program that left her exhausted. Every night she crawled into bed and fell into an easy slumber.

Within six days Susan was matching Rosemary in sit-ups and jumping jacks. Although she wasn't thrilled about the two-and-a-half-mile walk to work, she faithfully made the trek each morning.

On Wednesday, she woke at five-thirty, long before the alarm. Wouldn't Adam ever phone? Hadn't he guessed how much he meant to her?

Without questioning the wisdom of her actions, she laid back the covers and quietly slipped out of bed. She was out the door before Rosemary knew she was gone.

Although the morning was crisp and the sky dark, several runners were already in the park. She had no idea what time Adam ran, but with his office hours and hospital rounds, it had to be around six. She would wait around by the picnic area until he came into view and casually join him.

Fifteen minutes later, Susan stood shivering and miserable, convinced that Adam wasn't coming. And how would she ever manage to give the impression she'd "accidentally" run into him?

"Susan." Her name was shouted from the distance and she had to squint to see the source.

"Hi," she called, and waved, forcing herself to smile.

"I didn't know you ran." He slowed his pace to match hers.

"Yes," she mumbled, already feeling breathless. "Since I hadn't heard from you, I thought I'd join you once around the reservoir and see how you've been."

"Great, and you?"

"Wonderful," she lied. Just once, couldn't he tell her he'd been thinking of her? Her lungs were beginning to hurt, and she struggled to maintain the pace. Talking and breathing were almost impossible.

"How many miles do you run a week?" Adam said.

"Ten." She managed to get out the one word.

"Have you ever averaged your minutes per mile?"

"No." She concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other. She'd finish the course if it killed her. At just the moment Susan was convinced she was either going to faint, vomit or die, Adam stopped.

"Wow, that felt good."

Susan didn't respond. Instead she collapsed.

Adam joined her on the grass. "You okay?"

She didn't have the breath to assure him. Nodding her head was all she could do.

"I imagine my pace is a bit faster than yours."

She struggled to sit up. If he wouldn't say it, she would. "I missed you."

"I was going to call," he murmured.

"Why didn't you?" she whispered.

"You're an extremely attractive woman." There was a ragged edge to his voice.

"That's an excuse?"

"Susan," he said, then paused. "I'm a plain-looking man. People are going to take a look at us and see beauty and the beast. I don't think..."

"Stop it, stop it right now! Don't you ever say that to me again." Raising herself up, she jabbed a finger at his chest. "You are the most attractive, wonderful, fun person I know, and if I ever hear you talk like that about yourself or me again, I'll... scream," she said.

"You're managing to do a fair job of that now." He glanced around self-consciously.

"I know what I'll do," she cried. "I'll scar myself and then maybe you won't look at me like I'm Miss Perfect... or Gail. That was her name, wasn't it? Then maybe you'll treat me like a normal woman—as everyone else does."

A muscle jerked in his jaw, and Susan knew she had gone too far. He didn't like her to mention Gail.

"Have you ever stopped to think that maybe I didn't want to see you?" he demanded in a low growl. The look in his eyes was almost savage.

The words hurt more than if he'd slammed his fist into her stomach. For a stunned second she didn't breathe. Tears filled her eyes and she lowered her gaze.

"No, I guess I hadn't." She whispered the words in a husky, pain-filled murmur. Wearily she stood, her back to him. "I'm sorry, I won't bother you again." By the time she made it to the outskirts of the park, her vision had become a watery blur.

Pausing outside her apartment door, she wiped the tears from her face then let herself in.

"Susan," Rosemary cried. "Where have you been? I was worried." She stopped abruptly. "Susan..."

"Go to work without me today, will you?" Susan asked. "Tell Karen I'm sick. Maybe I'll be in later...."

"Sure. Are you going to be all right?"

"No." She tried to laugh. "But you go on. I'll live."

Rosemary left a few minutes later and Susan sank onto the couch.

Someone banged on her door. The sound reverberated around the silent room and her head shot up.

"Yes." She unlocked the door and her gaze collided with Adam's. "Susan, I'm sorry." He didn't bother with a greeting. "I didn't mean what I said." After a brief

hesitation he reached out and touched her shoulder.

Wordlessly, Susan walked into his arms and buried her face in his chest.

"Why?" The sound of her voice was muffled by the strength of his hold.

Two large hands cupped her face as his gaze probed hers. Susan noted a curious pain that tinged his eyes.

"You're so beautiful."

For the first time in her life, being attractive was a detriment. "Adam, please," she said. "I'm not."

"Enough for anyone to question what someone like you is doing with me."

"That's nonsense." Raising her own hand, she cupped his and pressed a kiss into his palm.

A sound came from deep in his throat as his mouth descended to hers, plundering her ready lips with a kiss that was fierce and hungry. Gradually the pressure lessened to a gentle possession as his mouth moved lazily over hers. The yearnings he created within her left Susan trembling.

"When I'm with you," he began, "I think I'm the luckiest man in the world. I treasure every minute and die every time we say goodbye."

Susan couldn't believe what she was hearing. "But why don't you ever call me afterward?"

"That's the way I feel when we're together," he admitted dryly. "Later I realize you've probably

got plenty of men wanting to date you."

"I don't," she murmured. "Oh, Adam."

"I wish I had a dime for every time I picked up the phone to call you or all the times I've found myself standing outside your apartment building. Then I stop and realize you'd be crazy to be interested in me."

"I admit it then," she told him. "I'm crazy, because I'm interested in you, Adam Gallagher. Do you need more convincing?"

His soft chuckle mussed her hair. "That'll probably hold me until I get downstairs. I'm not the most secure person when it comes to romantic involvements. I don't know if that's a result of Gail or just being homely."

"I wish you'd stop saying that," she said. "You are not ugly! But I don't know what to do or say to convince you."

"When you're in my arms, I don't need anything else. It comes after a long day at the office and I find that I want to share my day with you." His grip tightened as his mouth moved roughly over her hair. "Do you want to meet again tomorrow morning?"

"You mean—" she swallowed tightly "—to run?"

"Sure."

Susan wasn't about to refuse.

"Only this time let's complete the full loop. We only went a mile today."

THE FOLLOWING Monday morning, Susan was at the park expecting to meet Adam for their usual run. They had been meeting daily for almost a week. When he didn't show up, Susan assumed he was extra busy or had forgotten. When he wasn't there Tuesday or Wednesday, she felt hurt and disappointed. Was he playing games with her again? For the rest of the week she didn't go to the park. But when the weekend arrived, she couldn't stand it any longer.

Against her better judgment, she called him.

The phone rang five times. "Yes," he snapped.

"It's Susan." Her resolve wavered.

"I've been meaning to phone. I've had a hectic week." His voice softened somewhat.

"I thought you probably had."

Silence.

"You're closing me out again, aren't you?"

"No. I've just been busy, that's all."

"Too busy to run? You love to jog."

"Maybe next week. Listen, Susan, I've got something going on here. I'll call you next week."

True to his word, he did phone the following week, but the conversation was short and stilted. Susan was certain he'd given up running because he didn't want to meet her, so she told him that her schedule had been changed and she wouldn't be able to jog anymore.

Another week passed without hearing from him. Whatever was troubling Adam had to be settled in his own way. Susan didn't know what more she could do. Adam couldn't hold her and kiss her as he had, then turn away so abruptly.

He continued to phone, usually when she least expected it. He didn't ask her out, or suggest that they meet, and Susan didn't prod.

At Christmas she spent hours searching for a special card that would say exactly how she felt, deciding in the end that she'd never find one. She ended up mailing the same one that she had sent to all her family and friends.

Adam mailed her a card with his name scribbled at the bottom. There was no written message.

A few days before Christmas he phoned.

"I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas."

"You too, Adam." She paused.

"Are you going home for the holidays?"

"Yes, I'm flying out the twenty-third and will be back the twenty-sixth." She couldn't afford it; but her parents had paid part of the airfare.

"You're not staying long, are you?"

"I can't spare the time from the office."

An awkward silence followed.

"Are you jogging these days?"

"All the time," she lied cheerfully, anything to keep the conversation going. "I...was thinking about going this morning, in fact."

"I won't keep you then. Have a nice holiday, Susan."

For a long time after the line was disconnected, she held on to the receiver. She hadn't seen him since before Thanksgiving and was starving for the sight of him. Maybe he'd been hinting that he'd be at the park.

Shivering, Susan briskly walked the two-and-a-half-mile course, desperately clinging to the hope of seeing Adam. When he hadn't shown by the time she'd finished the full circle, tears of frustration and disappointment filled her eyes. Quickly she wiped them aside....

Dejected, she returned to the apartment and took a warm bath.

"KAREN WOULD like to see you," the receptionist, Dana Milton, told Susan when she walked into the office the second Monday in January. Christmas with her family had been wonderful, and Susan had returned to New York feeling relaxed and refreshed.

It was as well, since the impulsive Rosemary had eloped over the holidays with Fred from the health-food store. Susan would now be on her own in the apartment.

Later in the month she was scheduled to fly to Texas and speak at a writers' conference. That was probably what Karen wanted to talk to her about right now.

It wasn't. The first thing that came to mind as Susan went back to her office was that she'd need new business cards. She was now a full editor.

The first person she called was Adam. She hadn't talked to him since before Christmas.

"He'll be right with you," the receptionist told her.

"Susan, are you all right?" She'd not called his office before.

"Yes. I know I shouldn't call you like this, but I had some good news, and you were the first person I wanted to tell. I got a promotion. I'm a full-fledged editor now."

"Congratulations. I'm sure you deserve it." There was genuine pleasure in his voice.

"I won't keep you. I know this is an awful time to phone, but I was so excited I wanted to tell someone."

"I'm glad you did."

An hour after their conversation, a dozen beautiful red roses were delivered to her office. The sender's card bore only one word: "Adam."

WITH THE promotion came new responsibilities, and Susan threw herself into the task eagerly. But when she hadn't heard from Adam in several weeks, she nervously dialed his phone number. He answered on the third ring. "Hello."

"Hello, Adam. I haven't heard from you in a long time. Did you get my card?"

"It arrived last week. There was no need to thank me."

"Of course there was. But the reason I phoned was to let you know there's a small party next Friday night to celebrate my promotion."

He hesitated. "I'll have to check my calendar."

"Go ahead, I can wait."

"It looks like I've got hospital duty that night."

Disappointment washed over her. "I'll talk to Rosemary. I'm sure we can change it to Saturday night."

"I don't want you to do that."

"But I'd like you to be there."

"I told you, I'm busy," he said gruffly.

"Adam," she pleaded, angry with herself. "Please."

"Susan, no."

Never had any word sounded more hurtful or cruel.

THE MORNING of February second, Susan made an appointment with Adam's receptionist. A few days later she sat nervously in one of his examination rooms, praying this was the right thing to do. Once again she was swallowing her pride and coming to him.

"Susan?" The disapproval in his voice did little to calm her. But a gleam softened the hard look in his eyes. "You've cut your hair."

She'd forgotten he hadn't seen it. "It's not as short as it looks. I had it styled is all. Do you like it?"

He ignored the question. "What's the problem?" He remained on the opposite side of the room as if he wished to put as much distance between them as possible.

"Remember you said I could come see you if I was sick?"

"I remember." He didn't look pleased about it.

"I'm having a small pain," she continued, "on the left side of my chest, about the center."

"Your heart?" he questioned sarcastically. "Let me listen." He walked to the table where she was perched. Lifting up the back of her sweater, he placed the cold stethoscope on her sensitive flesh. "Take two breaths."

Susan complied. This wasn't going well. What had she expected? It was all she could do not to reach out to him, touch him. He looked tired, as if he was putting in long hours, but then so was she—immersing herself in work to forget.

"Everything sounds fine," he said flatly as he moved to the desk and pulled out a pad.

"Adam," she whispered. "I've waited three months to see you. At first you phoned me. Now you don't even do that. Adam, I thought by this time you would have worked things out. I need you. I'm miserable."

He ripped the sheet from the pad. "Have your druggist fill this."

"Are you listening to me at all?"

His eyes refused to meet hers. "If you continue to have problems, I'd suggest you see a specialist." His hand clenched the doorknob, and Susan noted that his knuckles were white.

"Don't do this to us, please." She hung her head, the soft curls falling forward to shield her.

"That prescription should take care of any problems you have. Goodbye, Susan."

She didn't even bother to read it, knowing it was for placebos. Grabbing her purse, she hurried out of the office.

Her cab jerked in and out of traffic, speeding up only to have the driver slam on his brakes a minute later. Susan hardly noticed until he yelled at her to hold on. She looked up to see a bus racing out of control, heading directly for the passenger side of the cab. Susan screamed.

The terror in her own voice was the only thing she heard as metal slammed against metal and she was thrown violently against the door.

DEEP, piercing pain filtered into the dark world in which Susan lay. Her head throbbed so hard that she raised a tentative hand to feel. Her fingers encountered a gauze wrapping. She tried to open her eyes, but one refused. The other opened just enough for her to recognize that she must be in a hospital.

A raised voice could be heard across the room. "I want a plastic surgeon brought in."

"I don't think she'll need—"

"I don't care what you think, I want one now. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Doctor."

Adam. Adam's voice was the angry one. Susan had never heard him talk that way to anyone. He moved to her side.

"So you're awake." The gentle quality she loved about him was back. "How do you feel?"

For a moment her mouth refused to obey. "Don't ask."

"I'll have the nurse give you something for the pain. You've been in an accident," he said softly. "One eye is swollen shut. The pain in your chest is from cracked ribs."

"My head?"

"You've got a whopper of a concussion."

"My face?" Her voice quivered.

"Luckily you put your hands up, which prevented your face from being cut any more than it was. There are several scratches. Nothing major."

A weariness flooded her, waves of fatigue rippling through her. Susan fought it as long as she could. Finally she succumbed to the overwhelming force as Adam whispered something about talking to her later.

When she woke again, the room was filled with light. She turned her head when a tall nurse opened the door.

"Morning, I thought you'd be awake by now." The white-capped nurse moved to the side of the bed and stuck a thermometer in Susan's mouth.

"When will Dr. Gallagher be in?" Susan asked.

"Dr. Gallagher?" she repeated. A frown marred her wide forehead as she removed Susan's chart. "You've been assigned to Dr. Manson."

Susan didn't need to ask, she already knew. Adam had requested to be relieved of her case. It

shouldn't have surprised her, when he'd rejected her so many times.

"What do I look like?" Susan had to know.

"Let's put it this way—" the nurse chuckled "—I wouldn't want to see the other guy. But you'll improve. Don't worry."

Dr. Manson was a short man with thinning gray hair and twinkling blue eyes. Susan liked him immediately.

"Good morning."

She smiled. "Morning. When can I go home?"

"We were worried last night about internal injuries, but you seem to be doing fine. I imagine tomorrow we can release you if you like."

"I like," she stated emphatically.

"Don't do too much today. Get out of bed if you want. I'll check with you tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Breakfast arrived and Susan managed to down some applesauce and a small bowl of Jell-O. Afterward she was so weak she lay back and, before she knew it, was sound asleep.

A noise in the room woke her. When she opened her eyes, Adam was standing beside her bed.

"Dr. Manson says you can go home tomorrow. I'll take half the day off and pick you up about noon."

Susan jerked her head around, shocked at his offer, then winced at the pain that shot through her head. "You were in the emergency room last night, weren't you?"

Adam nodded. "They called me."

"But how? I didn't give anyone your name."

He glanced away. "Apparently the prescription I gave you was clenched in your fist. The ambulance driver found it."

"Adam," she whispered imploringly. "Is my face bad? No one wants to tell me anything."

Again she noted how a nerve twitched in his jaw, but his eyes softened. "You've got a few cuts, but they'll heal quickly. Your eye's swollen, but quite a bit less than yesterday." He hesitated. "You're still the most beautiful woman I know. Within a month no one will know you were ever hurt."

"A month," she groaned.

"Honey, believe me, when I first saw you, I was afraid it was much worse."

Honey! The affectionate term rolled off his tongue as if he'd said it a thousand times. His lips lightly brushed her cheek.

"I'll see you later," he promised.

Susan leaned against the pillow and sighed. Immediately her ribs protested, and she released a quivering breath until the pain subsided.

After dinner Adam returned, helping her out of bed and walking at her side as they strolled the hallway several times. One hand was linked with Adam's while the other pushed the portable I.V. pole. Two beautiful bouquets had arrived that afternoon. One was

from Adam and another from her co-workers at Silhouette.

"How long will it be before I can go back to work?" she quizzed as they headed back to her room.

"I think a week should do it."

"A week," she cried. "I can't miss that much time." Already her mind was racing toward a writers' conference she was scheduled to speak at in Florida in the middle of March.

"Sure you can," he contradicted. "After the first couple of days, I don't see why you couldn't go in for a few hours in the mornings. But not more than that," he warned.

SUSAN LAY for a long time thinking after Adam had kissed her good-night. A light kiss against her forehead. Just the day before, he had pushed her from his life. The accident was the only reason he was back. But for how long?

He stopped in briefly early the next morning with the reminder that she should be ready to leave about noon, and Dr. Manson gave his smiling approval shortly after. "So, you're Adam Gallagher's girl. I must admit I've never seen him lose his cool the way he did after they brought you into the emergency room."

At Susan's shocked look, Manson continued. "Most doctors agree it's better not to treat family members, or those we love. The difficulty is in keeping ourselves detached enough not to react emotionally. It only took me two sec-

onds to see Adam cared deeply for you."

Susan wanted to argue that she was sure he was mistaken. But was he? Did Adam truly love her? If so, what could have prompted him to act as he had these last months?

During the ride home, Adam worked hard to lighten the mood and tear down the tension between them. Joking, he set her on the sofa, and fluffed up the pillows.

Susan tried to throw herself into his happy mood but failed miserably. When he insisted on cooking their dinner, she watched with amazement as he set the table and brought out an expensive bottle of wine.

As much as Susan wanted and needed him, she couldn't let this continue. "Adam," she whispered, "the accident wasn't your fault."

"I know that."

"Then why are you doing this? I don't know how to react when you're kind to me. I'm afraid." To her horror, large tears filled her eyes.

"Damn it, Susan. Don't cry. I can't stand to see you cry."

"Then just leave." She pointed a finger at the front door.

Adam stared at her, finally grabbing his jacket.

"Don't you dare leave me," she shouted.

He got as far as the front door, his hand on the knob. His back was to her.

"I need you," she whispered.

When he turned, a tumult of emotions played over his strong

face. Of its own volition, her hand reached out to him and he hurried to her side, falling to his knees and wrapping his arms around her. Even in his urgency he was conscious of her ribs and the pain his hold could inflict.

"Susan, dear God." He murmured her name over and over again. "I saw you in that room, blood everywhere, and I died a thousand deaths. If I lost you . . ."

Her hands roamed his back as she buried her face in his chest. "Oh, Adam," she cried, tears streaming down her face. "I've missed you so much. You sent me away and I wanted to die."

A tense groan was muffled as he found her mouth and savored again and again the softness of her lips.

Her hand lovingly explored the line of his jaw before curving into his thick dark hair. The kiss hardened, demanding and relentless, drawing from Susan her heart, and touching the softness of her soul.

When he pulled away, his breathing was hoarse and uneven. "Susan, we've got to stop," he groaned.

"I know," she agreed, and unbuttoned his shirt, desperate for the feel of his bare skin. When her fingers encountered the cloud of dark hair, Susan became incapable of coherent thought. The potent masculine feel of him enveloped her senses until they cried out at fever pitch.

When Adam's hands opened her blouse and cupped her unrestrained breasts, he gently kneaded

their fullness and she grew weak with desire. Lost in a mindless whirlpool, Susan groaned softly, as he kissed the swelling curve.

He pressed her back against the couch, and Susan drew in a sharp breath as pain pierced her ribs.

Adam hesitated, then pulled away. Still within the circle of his embrace, she could feel his aching regret.

"I'm sorry, love," he whispered. "Those ribs must be hurting like hell."

"Not as much as..." She paused, biting off the words. He already knew how much sending her away had hurt.

"Are you ready for a glass of wine?" His jaw was set in a determined line as he battled his need and desire. Gently he tugged her arms from his neck. He kissed her fingertips and then the bridge of her nose before helping her fasten her blouse. Standing, he moved into the kitchen and returned with two glasses of wine, handing her one.

Forcing herself to smile, Susan looked up. "What's for dinner? I'm starved."

"Crepes stuffed with shrimp and fresh mushrooms."

"Adam! You can cook like that?"

"Not quite, but I do an excellent job of placing something in the oven and setting the timer."

"Oh, Adam," she said happily. "We have so much in common."

THEY PLAYED a game of Monopoly after dinner. Adam won, but

Susan's interest wasn't on the board. Adam waited until she'd changed into her pajamas before kissing her good night. The kiss was almost brotherly.

"Miser," she complained.

"Troublemaker," he countered, kissing her soundly. But he didn't allow it to deepen into passion.

Locking the door after him, Susan leaned against the solid frame and swallowed a happy lump.

Adam was hers.

THAT EVENING was the first of many they spent together. Adam couldn't have been more gentle or loving. He kissed and touched her often. He made excuses to be with her. But he never allowed their lovemaking to rage out of control.

When Susan was able to return to work, he met her two and sometimes three nights a week. Occasionally they dined out, other times cooking for themselves, "setting the timer." Susan had never been happier. But late at night, alone, she couldn't push the doubts aside. How much longer would this last before Adam pulled away?

Three weeks after the accident and it was difficult to tell that anything had happened. Her face had healed beautifully, as Adam repeatedly told her.

Humming happily one night, she set the table, anticipating Adam's arrival. She placed a candle in the middle of the fresh linen cloth and popped a tuna casserole into the oven.

Adam knocked, and when she let him in, carelessly tossed his coat over a chair. Surprised at the restrained anger that seemed to exude from him, Susan didn't comment.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Have a bad day?"

"No worse than usual."

"I tried my hand at a tuna casserole."

He stared at the table. "What's the candle for?"

"I thought it might add a little romance to our meal."

"Romance," he spat. "You live and breathe that garbage, don't you?"

"If you don't like the candle, I'll take it away."

"I hate tuna," he shouted at her unreasonably. "If you'd bothered to ask, you might have known that."

"I'm sorry, I... I guess I should have."

"Do you have to apologize for every little thing? Don't you ever get tired of groveling?"

Susan breathed in sharply in an effort to control her temper. Wordlessly, she walked across the room, took Adam's jacket off the chair and handed it to him.

"It's obvious you've had a rotten day. I'm sorry about that. But I think it would be better for both of us if you left now. We'll have dinner another night." She held open the door.

"There won't be another night," he informed her casually. "The whole situation between us should never have happened. I knew the

minute I saw you at Ralph's that you spelled trouble." He jerked his arm into the jacket. "This is it, Susan."

Did he expect her to cry and beg? She wouldn't, not anymore.

His shirt was stretched across his broad chest, and Susan directed her gaze to the rippling muscles rather than meet his eyes. Her pulse drummed to an erratic tempo, and she cursed the telltale tremble in her voice.

"Goodbye, Adam," she whispered softly.

Two miserable days later Susan flew to Florida for the writers' conference. She arrived home late Friday afternoon.

Saturday morning, rather than face the day staring at the walls alone, Susan rose early and walked to the office to catch up with the workload on her desk. Letting herself into her small office, the first thing she noticed was a bouquet of flowers. The attached card read: "I'm sorry. Meet me at Tastings Thursday. Love, Adam."

Thursday! The flowers must have arrived when she was away. What must he be thinking? Grabbing her coat, she flew out of the office. Once on the street, she waved madly at a taxi and breathlessly relayed Adam's address.

She almost threw the fare at the astonished driver as she leaped out and raced inside to take the stairs two at a time until she arrived at the fourth floor.

She was leaning against the wall taking in giant breaths when Adam casually opened the door.

"Adam." She hugged him fiercely.

"Susan, are you all right?"

"Yes..." she gasped. "Adam, I was in Florida."

He sat her down in his living room and went to the kitchen.

"Here." He handed her a glass of water.

She set the water aside, and with eyes sparkling with happiness, she placed her hands on his shoulders. "I've missed you so much."

"You idiot," he groaned, and hugged her. "There was no need to half kill yourself to get to me. I already knew you were in Florida. When you didn't show, I called your office."

Her happy gaze met his as he kissed her hungrily.

"Were you miserable?" she asked him.

"Yes," he replied on a forceful note.

"I love it," she cried cheerfully, but her heart repeated that it was Adam she really loved.

He took her to the Palm Court at the Plaza Hotel, and they lunched on luscious salads. Not until the meal was finished did Susan notice the pinched look about Adam's mouth.

"I've been talking fifty miles an hour and hardly giving you time to say a word."

Wearily he rubbed his face. "It's been one of those weeks. I've been miserable without you, Susan."

He needed her, but he wouldn't admit as much. Something deep and dark was troubling him. He couldn't hide it from her; she knew

him too well. Perhaps that bothered him more.

"Adam?" she questioned softly. "What's wrong?"

"Did I mention that Joey Williams was back in the hospital?" He said it so casually that for a moment she didn't recognize the significance.

"No, you didn't." So that was it. Joey. The little boy Adam loved. "How...how's he doing?"

"Not good," he answered at last.

SUSAN DIDN'T hear from Adam until late Tuesday night of the following week.

"Hi, honey, how's your week going?"

"Fine, and you?"

"Great." The word was emitted in a flippant tone, and Susan wanted to shout at him that it wasn't necessary for him to lie to her.

"Any news?" She didn't need to clarify about whom.

"Nothing," he responded.

They met for dinner early the next week. Susan was several minutes late and found Adam already seated and studying the menu when she arrived.

"Sorry, but I got held up in traffic," she said as she slid into the seat opposite him and shrugged off her coat.

Adam looked up. "Are you ready to order?"

"Order?" she asked. "I've barely caught my breath. Adam, you wouldn't believe the day I've

had. First an agent who was making the most unreasonable demands. And just before I left an author called wanting to go over the editorial changes I'd made. By phone, mind you."

He offered her a poor facsimile of a smile.

"I'm sorry, Adam," she said sincerely. "I didn't even ask about your day."

"Nothing unusual. Mine certainly can't compete with a popular romance editor's day."

Susan decided to ignore that. "Ralph Jordan called today. He's giving another party. Are we going?"

"We?" He raised one thick brow.

"Adam, what is wrong with you? You haven't said a civil word since I arrived."

"Not for lack of trying, I assure you." His face was buried in the menu. "With you babbling inanities, it's difficult to speak at all."

Susan expelled a slow, measured breath. "Is it Joey?"

He slammed the menu on the table. "Joey's home. Are you satisfied?" He was nearly shouting, his voice biting and bitter.

Susan closed her eyes to a rush of pain. She never would have believed Adam could talk to her that way. "I think I've heard enough." Scooting out of the booth, she hurriedly put on her coat. "When you've settled whatever's troubling you, then give me a call. I'll be waiting."

He started to say something, but Susan didn't wait to listen. Instead

she hurried out of the restaurant and hailed a taxi before he had the opportunity to follow.

Another week passed before she heard from Adam again. He called to apologize, but he didn't suggest they meet and she didn't ask. Susan couldn't recall a more frustrating time.

Late one night, Susan lay in bed staring at the ceiling. There were only the darkness and the doubts. How could a man who was gentle and kind one minute turn into a snarling, unreasonable bear the next? Maybe she was totally wrong about him. Maybe the time had come...

The doorbell interrupted her thoughts.

Susan sat up and threw back her bedcovers. It was well past midnight. Who could it possibly be at this time of night? In her robe, she turned on the light switch in the living room.

The bell sounded again.

Peeking out the small hole in her door, Susan saw no one. "Who is it?" she called.

"Adam."

Susan unlocked the door.

He hesitated, searching her face. "I woke you."

"No," she told him. "I wasn't asleep. Come in."

He paused. "A cup of coffee would help."

"I'll put some on right away." Her eyes didn't leave him as he came into the apartment and slowly lowered himself onto the sofa. He looked terrible.

Moving quickly, she poured water into the teakettle. As she worked, Susan glanced into the room at Adam. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, face buried in his palms.

She moved to his side, kneeling in front of him. "Adam," she whispered, all the love in her heart shining through her eyes. "What is it? Won't you tell me?"

Although he looked at her, Susan was sure he was hardly aware she was there. "Joey Williams died tonight."

A soft protesting moan came from deep within her throat. "Oh, Adam," she whispered, "I'm so sorry." Sliding her arms around his stomach, she rested her face on his chest and started to cry. "You loved him so much." Sobs shook her.

Adam tried to push her away, but she wouldn't let him. He held himself stiff and unyielding until something seemed to snap within him.

He shuddered against her and released a deep, mournful cry like that of an animal caught in a trap, facing death. Fiercely he hauled her into his arms, hugging her so close that for a moment Susan was afraid he would crush her. Huge sobs racked his body as he buried his face in her neck and wept.

"All the years I studied and there wasn't a damn thing I could do. Never have I felt so damn helpless."

"You did everything you could," she whispered.

"Not enough, not near enough."

She couldn't understand anything more he said, his words muffled in her hair and by his tears. As the shuddering sobs subsided, she heard the whistle from the kettle.

Briefly Adam raised his head, noting the source of the distraction. Reluctantly he released her.

Susan walked to the kitchen, poured them each a steaming cup and returned to Adam. After a few sips of coffee, she placed her cup aside. Adam curved an arm around her shoulder, bringing her close. Soon he was asleep.

Carefully, she slipped from his embrace. He was exhausted, mentally and physically. When his head dropped to one side, she brought out a pillow and blanket from her bedroom. After removing his shoes, she lifted his feet onto the sofa and covered him.

Even in sleep, his look remained troubled. Susan watched him for a long time. He had come to her in his grief, and that meant more to her than the finest gifts. His trust and love were beyond price.

Flipping the switch to the lamp cast the room into darkness. Gently she bent down, lovingly brushed the thick hair from his forehead and kissed him.

When she woke the next morning Adam was gone. A scribbled note left on the kitchen table briefly thanked her and stated the date and time of the funeral. Susan didn't see him until that day. She slipped into the pew beside

him and listened to the service, her hand tightly clenched in his.

Afterward the Williams family came over to Adam. Mrs. Williams hugged him.

"We owe you more than words can ever express," she said. "Thank you for making it possible for Joey to come home those last days." She smiled weakly at Susan.

"You must be Miss Mackenzie. Joey mentioned how pretty you are." She inclined her head toward Adam. "Hold on to this man," she whispered. "There aren't many as wonderful as Dr. Gallagher."

"I know that," Susan agreed.

"In the end he hardly left Joey's side. Lord knows when he slept. Our family will never forget him."

Susan nodded because the lump in her throat had grown so large it was impossible to speak.

\*

"HAVE YOU got everything?" Adam lifted her suitcase.

"I think so." Susan surveyed her bedroom.

"I'm ready." Adam was driving her to the airport. After dinner she would be flying to Boston for a five-day promotional tour with several authors. Susan always enjoyed working with the publicity department, but she almost regretted having agreed to go. Something was happening with Adam, and she had no idea what.

"That look is in your eyes again," she told him as they sat in

a cozy restaurant not far from the airport.

Even his kisses had been different lately, almost polite yet wonderful and gentle. She didn't know how to explain it. But now wasn't the time to discuss it.

When it came time to board her flight, Susan couldn't fault his kiss.

"I'm going to miss you." His voice was a caress, husky and warm.

"Good, because you know how I feel." Adam had never verbalized the words, but neither had she.

"Yes, I do."

She heard the taut pain in his voice.

"Yes, I do," he repeated, as he lowered his mouth to savor the softness of hers. The kiss was slow and exploring, his tongue outlining her lips, coaxing her mouth open. Gladly Susan succumbed to the sweet tide of longing that swept through her.

TIME AWAY from New York helped put her relationship with Adam into perspective, but it didn't offer the answer to the doubts that plagued her.

When the plane touched down at Kennedy, she eagerly anticipated their meeting.

He waved when he saw her, and Susan had to restrain herself from running into his arms. Adam looked wonderful. The color was back in his face; his eyes were warm and excited.

"Welcome home." He looped an arm around her waist, took her hand baggage and kissed her cheek.

"You look marvelous."

"I am. How was the trip?"

"Great," she said, "but it's good to be home."

"It's good to have you back. I've got some fantastic news."

"What?" She stopped walking.

"I've accepted a position in Seattle, at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. I'm moving next week."

"Seattle, Washington?" The shock hit her full force.

"It's the opportunity of a lifetime," Adam continued, undaunted by her obvious surprise.

"Congratulations," she murmured.

"Honey, I've got a hundred and one things that need to be done. I've got to get back to my office right away. You understand, don't you?"

"Oh, sure. Of course I do." Fixing a smile on her face, she followed him to the baggage claim area, barely aware of where they were going.

When he carried her suitcases into the apartment, she stepped aside, a determined lift to her chin. He kissed her at the door. A brotherly kiss.

"Be happy for me."

"I'm thrilled," she lied. *I'm dying*, said her heart. "Go," she commanded. "I understand."

She understood all too well. Adam was running from New York. Running from the memo-

ries of the little boy he couldn't save. But most of all he was running from her love.

She barely slept. Just when she felt herself drifting off, the pain would return and she'd jerk awake.

Because she couldn't tolerate the thought of staying in the apartment on a Saturday morning, she dressed and walked to the park.

"Are you going to let him do this?" her voice asked. Yes, her heart answered.

Hating herself for being weak, she phoned him when she got back to the apartment.

"Hello." He sounded preoccupied, busy.

"Morning," she said. "Have you had breakfast?"

"No time. I'm sorting through my things, deciding what I want to take and what I'm going to store."

"Let me help you. I'll bring some croissants."

The pause was only momentary. "Sure."

"I'll help you pack books and stuff."

"There's no need," Adam answered unevenly.

*I'm not letting you go that easily*, her mind shouted.

The flaky croissants were still warm, but neither Susan nor Adam seemed to have much appetite. With a shaky smile, she pushed up the sleeves of her sweatshirt.

"I'm ready. Where would you like me to start?"

Boxes littered the living room. Most of the furniture was pushed

to one side. Bookcases stood against one wall.

"Go ahead and pack up those."

He left her alone, and went to work in his den. Susan recognized that the move was intentional.

After a half hour of silence she called to him.

"Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"Sounds great. I could do with a break."

She poured them each a cup and sat on the plush carpet drinking hers. Adam continued going through his desk drawers.

"There's a chance I'll be in Seattle sometime in June." She didn't add that was when her vacation was scheduled, but let him think it was business related.

"Wonderful." He didn't sound as if he meant it.

"My parents live in Oregon."

He looked up. "I'd forgotten that."

Of course he had. Washington State was as far away from her as he could get, and without knowing it he'd placed himself in her home territory.

"But I think I should warn you, my schedule is very tight."

Susan didn't know how much more of this she could take. He was saying that if she did come, he'd make excuses not to see her. A sad smile touched her face.

"What's so funny?" Adam asked.

"My thoughts, I guess."

The natural question would have been to ask her what she was thinking, but Adam didn't.

"I'll finish packing the books," she said, and stood.

Two boxes were already filled and Susan scooted them aside. She pulled a third cardboard case across the carpet, then carefully slid out the bottom row of books. As she did, several Christmas cards fell onto the floor. One was flowery and romantic: "TO THE WOMAN I LOVE." Another was humorous: Susan had read it that Christmas while looking for a special card for Adam.

Sharply she sucked in her breath. Four cards had spilled onto the carpet, each one fresh and unsigned. Adam had bought these cards for her. He'd deny it. But she knew. Because she had done the same thing.

Tears stung the back of her eyes.

"Susan, would you mind..." Adam came into the room and paused when he saw the cards in her hands. "Throw that stuff away. They're just some old cards."

"They're unsigned." One tear fell.

"Yes, well, just throw them away."

Another tear joined the first, followed by several more. "I don't understand you, Adam Gallagher."

He put a hand to the side of his head. "Damn it. You know how I feel about tears."

Susan hurled the cards at him. "You have no idea, do you?"

"I practically killed myself just for the pleasure of running with you!" she shouted. "I was cheer-

fully jogging miles and miles just to be near you. I swallowed my pride so many times I nearly gagged on it." Sobbing uncontrollably, she stormed from one room to another, finally locating some tissues.

Stunned, Adam stood in the hallway.

"You know what your problem is?" She pointed a finger at him. "Adam Gallagher, you're a coward. You won't say it, so I will. I love you. I'll love you all my life. Move to Washington! Have a good life! But I swear I'm going to haunt you. When you look into another woman's eyes it'll be my face you'll see. When you run in the mornings it'll be my footsteps you'll hear behind you. And...when you look into some little boy's face, you'll see the son you wouldn't give me."

Tears were streaming down her cheeks now. Wiping them aside, she looked at him one last time. He stood proud, defensive, stubborn...and insecure. "Goodbye, Adam." The words were issued softly, belying the inner turmoil. Taking her jacket, she stepped out of his apartment and out of his life.

Before she was aware of her destination, Susan found herself in Central Park. Her eyes were dry now.

She paused at the bench where they'd met in the mornings. Those few short days were the happiest of her life. Dejected and miserable, she sat, leaned against the back of

the bench, stretched out her legs and crossed them at the ankles.

She'd done it again—made a fool of herself in front of Adam. Fool or no fool, how could he leave her when she loved him so much?

Someone sat at the other end of the bench. Susan took it to be a stranger until he assumed the same position as she, crossing his feet at the ankles. Those shoes were lovingly familiar. Adam's shoes.

"I have to go away," he said in a controlled voice. "I'm so much in love with you that I can't hide it anymore."

She didn't move, the words paralyzing her.

"When we first met I couldn't believe someone as beautiful as you could be interested in me."

The argument was old. She was sick of it.

"Later, when I learned you were a romance editor," he continued, "I knew it would never work."

"Why?" The one word came out high and uneven.

"Because I can never be like the men in those books. The man every woman dreams about, the kind of man you deserve. I'm not rich or handsome. I'm a weak man. The night Joey died, I proved that to you. A man crying. I'll never be the strong and silent type."

"What makes you think I want that?" Still she didn't turn.

"It would be impossible for you to read and not compare me with the heroes in those books. Maybe not at first, but eventually, and I'd

fall short. It's not only that," he murmured. "You work with beautiful people and unreal situations. I deal with reality."

"I love you, Adam," she told him. "You, Dr. Adam Gallagher. I'm flesh and blood and capable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality."

"You were right when you said I'm a coward. I was in the park watching you last Christmas. Hiding."

"Hiding? When?" For the first time she turned to look at him.

"I purposely mentioned something about running, hoping you'd come to the park. Yet when you did, I stood in the distance, afraid that when I saw you again, I wouldn't be able to hide my love."

She released a shuddering breath. "You know, Adam, I was the one who introduced myself to

you. I asked you to kiss me that first time. I followed you, made excuses to see you. I even had to be the one to tell you I was in love first. But so help me, if I end up proposing, I'll never forgive you."

"Will this help?" He took something out of his pocket and handed it to her.

Susan sat up shocked. A diamond engagement ring from Tiffany's. "When? How?"

"I got the ring after the accident. I knew then I couldn't live without you."

"Why has it taken you so long?" she asked.

Adam slipped the ring on her finger. A smile of immense pleasure turned up the edges of his mouth. "I was just waiting for the right moment."

"Oh, Adam!" She smiled and threw herself into his arms.



### Solution to CROSSWORD #14 Vol. 3 No. 2

F	U	R	C	O	D	A	S	I	N
P	O	S	E	H	U	E	C	R	W
A	R	E	A	M	A	R	T	R	I
L	E	S	S	O	N	E	R	A	S
B	L	I	N	K	S	T	E	S	D
A	I	R							V
T	E	A	S	E	D	P	A	R	T
E	S	T	A	R	E	I	C	E	
L	O	O	T	A	C	T	I	R	O
F	A	T	E	M	O	R	E	N	D
R	E	D		S	O	L	E	Y	E



# JENNIFER GREENE

## Body and Soul



The combination of fear and desire that Claire felt for Joel made her unsure of herself. But he was the best antidote for the blues that made her ache for love....

“Strip to the waist, please.”  
The boy just glared at Claire. A switchblade knife was curled in his hand. As she cleaned the wound on his chest, he flicked it open.

“Can’t you find anything better to do than play around with street gangs?” Claire scolded. Leaning over him, she ignored the blade, working fast and efficiently. “This is going to hurt.” She added softly, “Like hell, I’m afraid.”

He didn’t flinch when she poked the anesthetizing needle through the tender skin near his nipple. At least fifteen stitches, she judged. A little deeper, and the knife would have pierced his lung. Makowsky was seventeen.

“Aren’t you tough?” she murmured. “I’m real impressed. Except this is the third time I’ve seen you in the past three months, and I’m sick of your face.” He didn’t flicker an eyelid. She continued to sew. “I told you the last time. You like this emergency room, fine, but there are hospitals closer to your own neighborhood. And if you get cut up like this again, you don’t walk across town. You don’t walk anywhere. *Capice?*”

When she was finished, five feet ten of scarred, solid muscle slid off the examining table. She watched while he tugged his T-shirt over his head, dragged a leather jacket on

and swaggered to the door. “Wait a minute,” she snapped.

His dead eyes focused back on her.

“Do you have cab fare home?” she asked.

For the first time since she’d met him, she saw a strange, almost human, expression cross his face. He shook his head before striding out. “I never met anyone could talk as much as my mother,” he said flatly. “Except maybe you.”

The revolving door to the first-aid room couldn’t slam, but it closed with a whoosh as he exited. Claire blew back a strand of ebony hair from her cheek.

The Makowskys in life made her heart ache. She could patch him up, but she couldn’t help him.

A fuzzy blond head with a nurse’s cap popped around the door. “He’s gone?”

“He’s gone,” Claire affirmed. Janice pushed open the door. “I don’t know how you handle that guy. He scares the wits out of me. I never understand how you keep your cool with patients like that.”

“What’s to keep cool?”  
Janice gave her a wry look. “Never mind. You wouldn’t understand. You’re the only one on the floor who isn’t glad it’s nearly midnight, and I doubt you’d even blink if I announced World War Three.”

Claire grinned. "Who's next, or did Barton cover him?"

"Dr. Barton's tied up, and room seven is all yours. But I'll be delighted to take care of him myself if you want a break."

"I'm not tired."

"Pity," Janice said sadly. "He has an itty-bitty cut on his right hand. And I could easily hold his left hand while you—"

"I'll sic him on you for the paperwork," said Claire.

Just past the Triage sign was the staff lounge. Claire ducked in to change lab coats. Washing her hands afterward, she glanced in the mirror. Dark gray eyes stared back at her, reflecting intelligence and sensitivity. A smooth sweep of raven hair framed an oval face with delicate features. Her looks were more striking than beautiful, but she was more concerned that her white coat sagged on her small frame. Getting a jacket from the laundry to fit her generally took a miracle. Maybe by her thirty-fourth birthday next week, she'd grow.

Winging back down the hall, she paused at room seven, noted the name on Janice's chart and opened the door.

She was one hundred percent doctor the minute she spotted the patient. The man was about thirty-five, extremely tall and lean. His tuxedo jacket was tossed next to him on the examining table. In dark pants, cummerbund and a white formal shirt open at the throat, he clearly hadn't planned to spend his evening in the emer-

gency room. A white linen cloth was draped around his hand.

"Mr. Brannigan? I'm Dr. Barrett. You cut your hand?"

"It's nothing," he assured her irritably. "But I couldn't get the bleeding stopped. I cut it with a cleaver."

The last thing on Joel's mind was a woman, and if it had been, the taller, leggier type usually drew his eye. Still, her low soothing voice was like black velvet, and those soft dark eyes held him mesmerized.

"You cut it with a cleaver?" she repeated.

"Cutting onions."

Nodding sagely, she unwrapped his makeshift bandage and regarded the angry tear on the crease in his palm. The cut was deep and clearly painful. He hadn't flinched when she touched the wound, but something about his pale color bothered her. "When you attacked the onions, did you suffer any other injuries?" she asked.

His eyes danced. "My pride."

She couldn't help but chuckle, until his left hand closed on her wrist. "What do you have in mind?" he asked her.

"Just a few stitches," she returned briskly. His thumb was moving slowly across her wrist. "Mr. Brannigan," she said gently, "there's no need to be nervous."

"Nervous? The last time I was nervous I was six years old, with a broken window behind me."

"Hmm." Mentally she acknowledged that he didn't look the nervous type. Still, the faintly

ashen sheen of his complexion continued to perplex her. Slowly, his hand dropped from her wrist.

"You're sure it's worth the fuss of sewing up?"

"Yes. Any injury to the palm is hard to heal, and this one's fairly deep." She washed her hands a second time, and then filled a hypodermic needle with anesthetic, squeezed a little from the tip and set it on the tray behind her. Perching on a stool, she scooted closer, dragging the rolling tray with her. Laying his open palm on a sterile cloth on her lap, she started gently cleaning the wound.

"Do you always work the evening shift?"

"Almost always. I'm a night person."

"Why an emergency room?"

Once the wound was clean, she reached for the hypodermic. "I tried private practice for two years, but this just seems to be my niche. What do you do, Mr. Brannigan?" She looked up.

His eyes focused on the needle, and his face turned to chalk. One hundred ninety pounds of dead-weight surged toward her. The wheels of her stool spun back, and she grabbed for the patient. For an instant they were both in midair. The next moment, she was squeezed between linoleum and man. All the air gushed out of her lungs.

Gingerly, she tried to move, assessing him first for damages, then her. Brannigan was fine.

"Janice!" Her voice was loud but calm.

By the time Janice appeared, Joel Brannigan was passed out between her splayed legs, and Claire was looking irritable.

"Good Lord. I admit I fell for him, but *you*?" Janice scurried over to kneel by Claire, reaching for the unconscious man. "Maybe I'd better call the orderly—"

"Skip it," Claire ordered. "Just hand me the hypodermic. We have a baby on our hands where needles are concerned. I should have picked up on it when I first saw him. Just hold him still for me. *Then* we'll worry about getting him back on the table."

She'd barely managed the shot before he came to. The women managed to get him back up on the table with his head between his knees. Claire sneaked a grin over his head at Janice, when they both heard a trail of very low four-letter words.

"I think he's better," Janice whispered dryly.

"I am *fine*. And trying hard to apologize."

"Still need me?" Janice asked. "There's a patient in nine—"

Claire nodded. "We'll be *fine*."

Those blue eyes glaring at her didn't appear to agree. "Dammit. Did I knock you down?"

"No problem," Claire said soothingly.

"You're *sure*?"

Actually, everything wasn't hunky-dory. The palm was an awkward place to stitch, and now she knew better than to let him see the suturing needle. She finally backed against the examining ta-

ble, perched against his side, and drew his right arm under hers so that she could lay his palm in her lap. Not a standard medical procedure, but his palm was secure and out of his sight.

"No shots, that's done," she promised. She was rather pleased with him. Most men would have had a macho fit over a faint. His first concern had been her. Sweet, really. Rare being more the point. "Just lie still for a minute. Will you do that for me?"

"I think," he murmured, "there's a hell of a lot I'd be willing to do with you."

Claire's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Gently sliding the curved needle under his skin, she drew up the silk thread and tied the first stitch. "Feel anything?" she asked.

"Your hips against my ribs. Nice hips," he complimented. "What time do you get off?"

"Midnight. And behave yourself." Two more stitches were done.

"You're beautiful," he mentioned.

"Thank you."

"Move your fanny back just a little. You'll be more comfortable."

There, he succeeded in making her head swivel around. Those dark eyes pounced hard on his.

"Are you going to behave?" she questioned mildly.

"I don't think so." He could see she was trying to hold back a smile. "It takes a great deal to throw you, doesn't it?"

"Hmm." She turned back to finish the stitching. "Can you feel any pressure?" she asked.

"All kinds. But believe me, my hand is happy between your..." He added, "How married are you?"

"Has anyone ever accused you of having a one-track mind?"

He chuckled, delighted with her.

Finished, Claire stood up and pushed aside the table cart. In spite of herself, she knew her face was a little flushed.

He frowned at her handiwork. "This is it? Don't I get a bandage?"

She shook her head. "You get nothing else, Mr. Brannigan, but orders to keep it clean and dry, and to show up back here—or at your own doctor's—in a week to have the stitches out."

"Joel," he corrected.

She made certain his balance was back and that the unnatural pallor was gone. Once her doctor's instincts had been satisfied, she let curiosity take over.

She saw the harmless smile but didn't buy it. He had the most wicked eyes she'd ever seen.

Dark bushy eyebrows arched over them. Squared-off cheekbones and a small scar near his jaw made for a rough look, not in keeping with the tux. The lines of experience on his brow were trophies of tough times, real pain. He wasn't an easy man to read. And he was an intimidating six feet two.

She found herself staring, woman to man, until she became aware that those blue eyes were

glinting knowingly down at her.  
"Coffee?" he said quietly.

She shook her head and moved to open the door. "No more dizziness?"

He just looked at her. "I think," he said, "that you and I are going to run into each other again."

He was gone. Claire wasn't aware she was holding her breath until it all left her lungs in a single whoosh.

"AUNT CLAIRE? Are you *still* asleep?"

Claire's eyes opened groggily, on a pair of strawberry-blond pigtails and two innocent blue eyes. "I've been waiting my entire life for you to wake up," said the four-year-old. "I made pancakes and bacon. Helped Grandma get dressed. Washed all the dishes. Gee. It's practically bedtime again."

"Is it?" Claire murmured. By the clock next to the bed, it was just after 7:00 a.m. Yawning, Claire adjusted the pillow. "You made the pancakes and bacon, did you?"

"Completely by myself," her niece assured her.

A quelling "Dot?" echoed through the hall. By the time Claire's mother opened the bedroom door, the room was utterly still except for the quivering lump of bottom sticking up under Claire's comforter.

Nora Barrett viewed the lump, and giving Claire a look, she said loudly, "I told Dot that if she even came *near* your room before nine,

she was going to get a ruler on her backside."

"Haven't seen her," Claire said blandly.

"If you happen to, you can tell her that she's in trouble. Working the late hours you do, you need your sleep, and even four-year-olds can learn a little consideration. If you think there's a chance you could still doze off..."

Claire shook her head with a grin. "Don't worry about it, Mom. I'm getting the feeling I'd better get out of bed."

"I don't want to rush you," her mother said. "And I don't want you all tired out for your date tonight. It's rare enough you get an evening off—Walter!" A howling bloodhound turned the corner to the bedroom on a skid, and lurched up on Claire's bed. She petted him soothingly, hearing a fire siren in the distance. "It'll be over in a minute, Walter," she assured the frantic dog.

"This place is getting worse than a madhouse," her mother complained.

"If you would all clear out," said Claire, "I promise to get up and moving."

The exodus was more lingering than hurried. As Claire pulled off her nightshirt, she wondered vaguely how easily a woman could conduct a nice illicit affair in this house. The chaos was so constant that she doubted anyone would notice if she brought a man home to bed.

Still, it was past time she moved out, reestablished her own place.

Two days ago she'd turned thirty-four. She'd been home for four years, ever since her divorce was final. That same year her sister Sandy had also moved back, with a huge chip on her shoulder and an illegitimate bundle named Dot. Claire's staying had been less choice than circumstance. She'd been kept busy loving her little niece who needed affection so badly, with Sandy still trying to pay back every man alive for the one who'd left her stranded.

Between her family and her work there'd been no time for a man. Only this birthday seemed to have hit her hard. Was she really content to lead a nun's existence for the rest of her life?

Rationally Claire knew she'd done all she could to save her marriage. Yet she feared Steve had been right when he'd accused her of being incapable of the kind of commitment a wedding ring demanded.

And she'd rather smother at home than go through another broken marriage.

SHIVERING, Claire pushed through the revolving glass doors of the Falk building. One of Chicago's newer convention centers, it was three blocks from University Hospital. Marble floors and crystal chandeliers dominated the lobby, and the whole place reeked of expensiveness. Not her normal watering place, but Ralph had insisted on this belated birthday dinner.

She punched the Up button and slipped out of her heavy winter

coat while she waited for the elevator. The doors opened. Claire took a step and then halted.

The doors closed again while she was still standing there, biting her lip irritably. Foolishness, claustrophobia. She jabbed the button again with her thumb, fussed with a spot of lint on her cuff. Her dress was white angora, a simple style that covered everything it showed off. Normally she plucked it from her closet whenever she needed a mood boost.

It wasn't working. The moment the elevator doors slid open again, she forced herself to step into the empty cubicle. *Shape up, Claire.*

The elevator stopped two floors up to let in a tall man in a tuxedo. The upward surge attacked her stomach, but she was distracted by her companion.

Joel made to push his floor button, and then turned around when he saw twenty-three was already lit up. Surprise hit him less than simple pleasure. For two weeks, he'd found himself studying women, looking for one with those same beautiful dark eyes.

The color of her dress should have promoted pure, virginal images. It failed. Next to her dark hair and cream coloring, white was strikingly alluring, and the clinging angora molded delectably over gentle curves. Slim legs led down to a frivolous pair of strappy leather sandals.

He leveled a lazy grin in her direction. "Is *that* what happens when you take off your coat? I

hate to tell you this, Doc, but that figure is dangerous."

"Watch it. I carry needles in my back pocket," she said gravely.

He chuckled. "You also do very good work. The hand's all but healed." He lifted his palm for her to see. "Are you going to the Top Hat on twenty-three?"

She smiled. "Belated birthday dinner. My date's waiting for me."

Joel's expression didn't change. When a man grew up on the South Side of Chicago, he learned to expect shadows coming out of the corners. Shadows were challenges, not obstacles.

The elevator gave a sedate lurch at twenty-three. Only the doors didn't open.

Joel frowned, punched the Open Door button and waited. "Nothing to worry about," he said lightly. "We've been calling this elevator Fussy Gussy ever since she was installed." He inserted a key into the panel above the floor numbers, then reached in for a telephone.

Claire vaguely heard him clipping out an order. She was too busy swallowing to listen. Was it her imagination, or was there suddenly less air?

"Doc?"

"Hmm?"

"Something tells me you feel about elevators the way I feel about needles," he said dryly. "They'll have the doors open in a few minutes. I guarantee it."

"Yes." There was less air.

"There's plenty of air," he said quietly. "You're not seriously frightened?"

"Of course not." Nothing threw Claire. Anyone could tell him that. Only her palms suddenly turned slick as butter as she stared at the door.

"Are you going to faint on me?" he murmured, then uncoiled from his lazy slouch and crossed to reach her. His hands curled firmly on her shoulders.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Yes." Sort of. His closeness helped. In a way. Her eyes focused on the starched frilled shirt in front of her. His chest was hard and lean beneath it. Like ballast. And she felt his body heat, distinctly male, and helplessly distracting.

"We'll be out of here in five minutes. There's a backup ventilating system even if all the power went out, which it hasn't. Nothing dangerous." He added wryly, "Are you listening?"

"Yes," she said absently.

"Have you ever had to try an unconventional cure on a patient?"

"Yes, of course—"

"Because I'm looking for an excuse to kiss you silly."

His mouth hovered low and then gently shaped to her parted lips. It was warm, soft, inviting. Claire reached for reason in a brain too cloudy to care. It had been incredibly long since a man dared to kiss her like this.

She felt her purse sliding down her arm, heard it flop to the floor. He dropped her coat. Before her

arms lifted to wind around his neck, his lips had homed in on hers again. This time the smooth pressure of his mouth was bold, demanding.

He wasn't a soft man. His chest was unyielding muscle, his thighs lean and taut. Tension and power were part of his build. The only hint of softness came from his mouth, and those even lips kept moving over hers.

"Joel," she breathed against him.

"You remembered my name." He sounded surprised and definitely approving. "The color's also back in your face. The cure worked," he whispered. "Are you going to open your mouth for me?"

Claire opened her mouth with the obvious answer, and found his tongue slipping in, intimately warm, smooth and damp. That tongue traced the back of her teeth, then wandered to her soft inner cheek.

His right hand was no less limber than his left, in spite of his recent injury. Both slid slowly over the soft angora fabric, from the length of her spine to that hollow dip at her waist. One by one she could feel his fingers gently denting her bottom, molding her to the saddle between his splayed legs.

Her cheeks flushed. She pulled back, her arms nervously dropping to their sides. His palm reached up, just wanting to touch her. He smoothed back her hair, a gentling, soothing caress.

Claire's face lifted. His hand dropped to his side. Desire etched his features in stern lines, and she had the sudden intuition that this was a man who rarely played. He wasn't a man to be toyed with. He was worth more.

Confused, she found herself staring at his face, uncertain what she was feeling or what to say.

The elevator doors jerked open, startling her. "Mr. Brannigan?" a voice said.

Joel smoothly retrieved her coat and purse and handed them to her as he exchanged a brisk word with the harried-looking man in a maintenance uniform.

"The lady all right?" asked the whiskered man.

"The lady's just fine. Wait here, if you will...." Joel steered her around the corner and halted abruptly. She looked utterly delectable with her mussed hair and red-crushed lips. "You *are* all right?" he murmured.

"Yes." She flushed. *Claire, act your age.*

"The ladies' room is that way." He motioned. "Believe me, you couldn't look more beautiful, but I have a feeling you might want to repair a few damages before you meet your... date."

"Listen. I think you may have misunderstood—"

He shook his head. "Believe me, I know when a woman is kissing me back." His mouth crooked in a teasing smile and he was gone, his hand lazily slung in his tux pocket, his stride lithe and free.

\*

BRUSHED, blushed and reperfumed, Claire walked out of the ladies' room at a crisp, efficient pace suitable for a thirty-four-year-old woman doctor who never lost control of her life. She should be ashamed of herself for responding so ridiculously to a near-stranger. She also should be embarrassed. Actually, Claire was both, but she was also slightly amused.

She'd been on a vestal virgin perch for four years. Maybe it was time someone knocked her off.

She spotted Ralph immediately, standing by the maître d'. His easy grin lit up as she pounced on him for an affectionate hug. "Thought you'd never get here," he scolded.

"I thought you'd skip out the minute you saw the prices," Claire teased lightly.

"It's your birthday. If I'd let you pick the restaurant, we'd have ended up in a deli."

"What's wrong with a deli?"

A waiter led them to the table Ralph had reserved, and they both opened gold-rimmed menus. Claire convinced herself she was relaxed. Ralph was just...Ralph. As comfortable as old shoes. Divorced two years before, he'd often shared a lunch or dinner with her. His specialty was pediatrics, Claire's second love after emergency. She settled back, determined to enjoy.

Within a year of opening, the Top Hat had gained an incredible reputation in Chicago. Claire could see why. The menu included a va-

riety of unusual cosmopolitan choices, and the decor of the place was irresistible.

Ralph had reserved a table overlooking Lake Michigan. The carpeting was red plush, the silver gleamed and the tablecloths were a scarlet damask. A single candle flickered from each table, bedded in pewter.

Floor-to-ceiling windows caught the black diamonds of the ice on the lake. The mesmerizing brilliance of a city that came alive at night was all reflected on the water.

"Are we awake?" Ralph questioned gently.

Claire, her chin cupped in her palm, leveled her eyes away from the window. "Sorry. Woolgathering."

A humorous frown drew his brows half together. "You have an odd look in your eyes tonight. I have this fear that you're going to go and do something stupid like fall in love, and then I'll lose my dinner companion."

She chuckled. "*Not likely,*" she assured him.

The waiter appeared. "The owner suggested you might like a little wine before dinner. Compliments of the house." He poured them both a glass of Bernard-Massard Kir Royal, and left the open bottle in a chilled silver urn.

Ralph sipped the sparkling wine and glanced curiously at Claire.

"Don't ask me," she said lightly. But she knew. The clues had been obvious, of course: Joel's tux, that he'd exited on the restaur-

rant floor. She just hadn't put those little details together.

Ralph was still looking at her. "I think," she said casually, "the owner was a man I once patched up in the emergency room. You know, we really don't have to eat here. I'd be just as happy to go to a deli. You just bought into that practice, I know you're paying alimony—"

"We're staying," said Ralph. "I love this place."

Claire felt obliged to chatter, which was easy enough. They wandered into shoptalk and she was almost relaxed again, when she heard a voice behind her.

"Joel Brannigan." A long arm stretched across the table to Ralph. "I hope you enjoyed the wine? And I thought I might offer you a few specialties of the house for your dinner. We're old friends, aren't we . . . ?" He waited an imperceptible moment, eyes on Claire. "I collapsed on Dr. Barrett in emergency once. I hoped I could make it up to her with dinner." His smile was winsomely boyish, as behind him, like the devil's side-kick, a waiter was rapidly opening serving dishes. Oysters on the half shell appeared first, then a Mediterranean salad.

Joel suggested lamb cooked in nectarines, a Persian dish, for Claire. Chicken saltimbocca was chosen by Ralph. When dinner was served, both men were chatting like old friends.

"How'd you happen to get into the restaurant business, if you don't mind my asking?" Ralph

grinned. "Claire's always telling me I can't mind my own business. I think it comes from working with kids all day."

Joel smiled lazily in return. "I got into this line of work through law school. I earned my school fees as a short-order cook. The wages improved as I worked my way up from hamburger havens into serious restaurants. By the time I passed the bar, I discovered there was a bigger fortune to be had. The Ruby Plate was my first place, but the Top Hat's my real baby."

Stop it, Claire felt like saying. He was looking at Ralph, but talking to her. She could feel it.

Ralph was halfway through a dissertation on pediatrics when he started coughing. "Peppe—"

Frowning, Joel thumped him on the back. He snapped his fingers; a waiter rushed over. "Too much pepper? I don't believe this. Bring the gentleman another dinner immediately."

"No nee—" Ralph choked. "There's every need. Listen. You just relax for a few minutes. In the meantime, if you don't mind I'll steal Claire for a dance in the other room."

Ralph's eyes were watering as he grabbed for a glass of water. "Go," he said hoarsely. "Please."

As Joel paused at the edge of the dance floor and turned around, Claire favored him with a vitriolic stare.

"You put pepper in Ralph's dinner deliberately."

"Doc," he murmured, "I've worked like hell to build the culi-

nary reputation of this place. You really think I would have risked it for a dance I could have asked for anyway?"

"I have to go back," she said unhappily.

"Not for one dance, you don't."

"When I come with a man, Joel, I leave with him. I followed you out here to tell you that . . . I know you must have misunderstood my behavior in the elevator. But really . . ."

She was so miserable. She also didn't know how to dance. Joel wrapped his arms around her, making it easier for her to follow him. He could never admit to spiking Ralph's dinner. He'd only been reduced to that when he realized Claire was determined to ignore him all evening.

For the moment he had the advantage. "Take it easy, Doc," he said mildly. "Your Ralph really didn't mind about this dance, you know. He was embarrassed, and all but begging to be left alone for a few minutes."

"This isn't right," she said mutinously.

It might not show, but Joel was as wary of love as the lady in his arms. Her eyes, her laughter, her sensuality, her natural manner when he'd first met her—so much drew him, when he hadn't expected to be drawn again into a love web. But he wasn't letting her go.

"I'm going to see you again," he murmured.

"No." Her voice came out breathless and low.

"We're going to make love," he whispered.

She shook her head as the song ended.

Joel's hands tightened at her waist. "One more."

"No!"

He looked at her, and she flushed. He could feel the tension in her fragile limbs. Very gently he draped her arms on his shoulders, holding eye-to-eye contact until she shook her head with a fierce sigh and laid her cheek in the crook of his neck. He closed his eyes as the music started.

Claire felt as if someone had tossed her into a stormy sea. Her breasts suddenly ached, as if they were full and huge, when she was small in build. How could that happen? It was only a dance, Claire reminded herself. Yet wanting stole through her body like a slow, seeping drug. She felt his shirt and imagined his skin. She felt his hand on her spine, and could feel the imprint on bare flesh.

Foolishness. Magic. Craziness. Her mother liked to say that Claire could knit during an earthquake and never miss a stitch. Nothing threw Claire . . . except closed-in spaces. She was too smart to invite trouble. Yet her body was swaying against his. She could feel his arousal growing against her, and she desperately wanted this man, and no other, inside her. Just this man. Now.

"You can either pull back a little, or find yourself being made love to on the dance floor."

She smiled up at him. He shook his head.

"You're asking for trouble," he murmured lazily.

"I couldn't be," she assured him. But before she'd gathered her lethargic wits together, his mouth had covered hers.

When his head finally lifted, his eyes sparkled like blue diamonds of wanting. He clearly didn't give a damn if the whole world saw. When had the song ended? The singer was nowhere in sight, and the other people had already filtered back to their tables. Claire whirled for the door.

As she ran past crowded tables and black-coated waiters, all she could think of was escape. Ralph glanced up as she approached, beaming genially.

"You can't imagine the tremendous meal I've had. There must have been seven courses. I tried to make them wait for you, but they just kept bringing the food."

So normal. When her heart was having hysterics. "Ralph, I have a terrible headache," she said quietly. "Would you mind taking me home?"

"MORNING," Claire murmured sleepily from the kitchen doorway.

Her mother and sister were fussing with bacon at the stove. "Good morning!" Nora beamed back. "How was your dinner with Ralph?"

"Terrific, thanks."

"Where did you go?" Sandy asked.

Pouring herself a cup of coffee, Claire gave them an abridged version of her evening.

"Does anybody think this is a good day for the zoo?" Dot inquired.

Sandy laughed. "It's the middle of winter, nut."

Dot's blue eyes quickly lost their hopeful look. "I know," she said softly. "I just heard they had a giant panda, and I thought—"

Sandy stood up, scowling. "Now scoot. Back to your cartoons."

Dot's shoulders slumped dejectedly as she ambled into the other room. When Sandy left to get dressed, Claire and her mother exchanged glances.

"I can live with her affairs," Nora said in a low voice. "She's a grown woman, and she's been raised right, she'll come to her senses again. But when I see the way she treats that child . . ."

"She isn't having half the affairs she'd have you worry about, Mom." The bacon done, Claire whirled around to see Dot's woe-begone face reappear in the doorway.

"Where's Mom?" she asked.

"Don't know. But I was planning on a walk to the children's zoo after breakfast, if I could find someone to go with me," Claire said lightly.

"I'd go with you!" Dot volunteered.

"It'll be cold," Claire warned.

"I don't care!"

"Does anyone in this household want scrambled eggs? I've been

trying to make breakfast for an hour." Nora turned up the radio for a favorite song and started cracking eggs over a sizzling frying pan. Claire went to her room and hurried into old corduroy jeans and a bulky mauve sweater. Returning to the kitchen, she heard the doorbell.

Stepping over the dog, Claire made it to the door in one breathless rush. When she opened it, she was too shocked to say anything.

Cold air wafted around Joel, who stood tall and silent as he looked at her. And then he smiled. "Good morning."

"Who's there?" Nora called from behind her.

"Who's there? Who's there?" chanted Dot.

Joel's eyes never left Claire's. Like a sponge, he absorbed the look of her face without makeup. "I thought I might catch you home on a Saturday morning," he said quietly. "Claire, I needed to see you again."

Eyes wide with curiosity, Nora's head appeared over Claire's shoulder. "For heaven's sakes, come in. It's colder than a stone out there."

Claire moved, somewhat mechanically, feeling a moment's pity for him. Joel had no idea what he was getting into. Once he identified himself as a friend he didn't have a chance. Nora cracked three more eggs, poured him coffee, and made steady conversation about life, the weather, and women mayors.

Dot settled Indian style on the chair next to him. Did he know

they were raising a live bear in their backyard? she asked.

Walter lurched to a sitting position, laid a wrinkled head on Joel's knee and closed his eyes again.

Joel politely raised his voice over the din. "I had in mind stealing Claire for the morning," he told Nora.

"Sorry," Dot said instantly. "Aunt Claire's going to the zoo this morning. She promised, didn't you, Aunt Claire?"

LINCOLN PARK was nearly empty of people on this freezing February morning. Dot, bundled in a bright red snowsuit, was riding astride Joel's shoulders. "Lions now," she ordered.

"Have you considered putting her down so she could walk?" Claire asked blandly.

Joel looked appalled. "She doesn't want to walk."

"Joel likes me up here," Dot explained.

"Of course I do, poppet," he added dryly.

By one o'clock they'd zigzagged the entire length of the park twice, seeing every exhibit that was open in the winter. Joel bought a trayful of chili dogs, popcorn and drinks from a vendor, and the three devoured the junk food from a park bench.

Afterward, Dot alternately raced ahead and fell behind, occasionally bringing them treasures: two pinecones, a branch shaped like an L, three stones.

Except for claiming Claire's arm as they walked, Joel never let on

that he had any interest in the day beyond entertaining a four-year-old.

As they finally started the long walk back to the car, she caught the first hint of mischief in his eyes. "See how harmless I am? Have I once grabbed you?" He added abruptly, "How long do I have to stay on good behavior?"

She chuckled. "For another hour. When you can take us home so I can change clothes and go to work."

"Then we've got a lot to cover in an hour," he murmured. And then looked at her.

He hadn't fallen in love in years. One minute he felt like laughing at himself, the next he doubted his sanity.

"What is all this we have to cover in the next hour?" Claire asked wryly.

"That I wasn't after a short night of fun and games."

Claire's eyes immediately searched for Dot, and he saw the quick color that climbed her cheeks.

"She's off looking for a four-leaf clover for me."

"It's February," Claire objected.

"Which is why it should take her a while." He motioned to the spot of red snowsuit in the distance. "I've always wanted one of those."

"You're old enough to have half a dozen kids."

"I was married for five years, but my ex-wife didn't want children."

"Joel," Claire said abruptly. "I'm not asking."

"Hush. I'm busy building trust," he scolded. Exasperated eyes turned to him, but he shoved her hat down over her eyes and kept talking. "I don't want a glitter lady, I had one. For that matter, I've had my share of quick affairs. What I want, Claire, is a woman I can talk to. Laugh with. I want a woman who's comfortable sometimes with just silence. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly. His gloved hands were cupping her face now, holding her still. All she could see were his blue eyes, bright, clear and so intense.

"No games, Claire. I won't play games with you. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"More importantly, do you believe me?"

"What I believe," Claire said slowly, "is that you're a bad case of heartache running around on two legs."

"Lunch. Wednesday."

\*

JOEL HAD spent a great deal of time deciding where to take her. He wanted her alone. He wanted her at his mercy, yet hoped to have her feel at ease. Not the easiest of requirements to fulfill.

As he parked the car, Claire stared in surprise. The weathered sign read Shar-Su'un; the unpretentious building could have used a paint job.

"Now, don't judge until you've been inside," Joel admonished. He ushered her inside, where he took her coat and then took off his shoes. "Custom of the house," he murmured.

Claire left her sandals next to his. A tiny man in black Oriental attire offered them both white paper slippers, but neither took him up on it. He led them up a narrow set of stairs, stopped at a tall screened door, and bowed.

Claire bowed back. The man beamed at her. A moment later she felt transported to another world.

The tiny room was carpeted in gold, with thick gold cushions on the floor surrounding a low, black lacquered table. A mural of swallows at sunrise had been painted on two walls. In the corner a bonsai tree spread its delicate branches over a miniature fountain.

Although Claire was somewhat unnerved to be in a room no larger than a closet, she was still enchanted.

"You like it?"

"I love it," she corrected, and sank down on a cushion. Joel settled Indian style next to her, which put her within touching distance.

She glanced away. *We're going to keep this light, Claire. Just have a good time....*

"Are you going to trust me to order for you?"

"Maybe in the next life." She'd eaten Japanese before. Raw fish wasn't her favorite.

Each course was served by their tiny waiter, who stayed to ensure they were pleased and then left si-

lently. Claire had ordered standard fare, but she was intrigued by Joel's dishes.

He offered a morsel of food. "Just try," he coaxed.

"Exactly what is it?"

He shook his head. "You'll have to take the risk."

She did, and after swallowing the delectable tidbit, regarded the rest of the dishes in front of him more favorably.

"Who'd have guessed you'd like octopus?" he said.

They bantered lazily, but Claire's mind was more on some of the things he'd told her.

Joel's mother had deserted him before he'd started school, and his father wasn't much into working. By the time he was ten, Joel had lied his way into his first job at a hamburger place. He'd bused and washed dishes—and managed to feed himself.

From those beginnings, he'd risen by sheer guts, anger and determination.

Claire also guessed that he was a lonely man.

"You're very good at making me talk," Joel said.

She poured him a second cup of tea. "I wanted to listen."

He motioned her to lean back against him. "So do I." He pushed a cushion against the wall next to him.

Claire leaned back. "I've always had it easy, Joel," she said quietly. "I've always been loved, never wanted for anything. My dad was a professor at the University of Chicago and I adored him. The

only unbearable thing was his death."

"You always wanted to be a doctor?"

"My mother can tell you about the time I was four and dragged home a pigeon with a hurt wing."

Very slowly, he stretched out an arm and drew her into the crook of his shoulder.

Claire's eyes closed helplessly. She could feel his warmth through her silk blouse. The heat of his side, and the strength of the man. When her eyes opened again, she was suddenly aware of how long she'd been sitting in a tiny closed room without feeling oppressed by it.

"Share," he ordered. "Talk to me."

She started telling him about her sister, because nothing else seemed to come into her head. "Sandy fell in love with a man named Greg Barker five years ago. When he was offered a job in the east, he took it, leaving her high and dry and three months pregnant."

"Did he know?" Joel questioned.

Claire shook her head. "She said it was over before that. He didn't love her, there was already another woman. But Sandy has let it destroy her."

"In what way?"

"She dates any man who asks her—who has red hair and blue eyes like Greg. Only she doesn't see that that's what she's doing...and she takes it out on Dot." Claire's eyes clouded. "It's not physical abuse, it's emotional.

Sandy gives her no attention, no love, no affection. Mom and I can only make up for so much."

"Do you know the name of the company in the east where this Greg Barker works?" Joel asked idly.

"I... Fankin and somebody, I think. Why?"

"Because," Joel said gently, "it sounds very much as if your sister needs to see this man again, to get him out of her system. You want me to find him for you?"

"I don't even know if that's possible," she said.

"We'll see." He would try. Greg Barker didn't matter to him, but proving something to Claire did. "In the meantime..." He turned her hand, so that her palm was facing him. "We see a very long lifeline here. Of a lady who is willing to talk about other people at length, but rarely herself." He glanced at her. "We also see a very long wealth line."

"That would be nice."

Very gravely he continued to study her palm. "You got lots of spankings as a child."

"You have a Romany background as well as Irish?"

He nodded. "You like spindly shoes. You have wonderful legs. You stayed out all night after your senior prom—"

"I did not."

"Hush. *Almost* all night."

"Brannigan. I had the flu."

Joel dropped her hand. He held her instead with his eyes. "I see a man," he said, "who hurt you very badly...."

Her smile died. A valve closed in her brain, and she suddenly felt the claustrophobia of four walls. His game wasn't a game. He wanted to know too much, too fast.

She'd felt the sensation before. A man who'd wanted to own her mind—who wasn't content being loved with her heart. A man who insatiably demanded more.

Rushing sensations of smothering clogged her head, disorienting her. "I made a mistake, coming here with you." She groped for her purse. Her face was white, and she tried to smile but couldn't keep it. "I'm sorry, Joel," she said in a soft voice. "Please believe that."

"Wait!"

"Thank you for the lunch," she said abruptly.

It was foolish but suddenly she couldn't breathe. Low ceilings and walls were closing in on her and her only thought was finding air.

She could hear Joel's footsteps behind her, but they weren't as fast as her own. She couldn't stop running.

She snatched her shoes and coat and hauled in huge lungfuls of air as her stocking feet hit the pavement.

She hailed a taxi, climbed in, slammed the door, and never looked back.

WHEN CLAIRE left the emergency room the next night, Joel was waiting for her. And so the pattern was set. By the time February turned to March, they were both experts on Chicago streets at 3:00 a.m. Some nights they walked the

lakeshore; some they wandered through the entertainment district; some nights they window-shopped on Michigan Avenue. Other times they said nothing, just set a direction and walked.

They passed few people at those hours, but those they did were usually yawning and weary. Claire's step was as brisk as spring, her laughter low-pitched and throaty. She loved walking. She loved the silence of the late night.

She was a disaster when she lost a patient. Joel had to guess what had happened the first time; she didn't tell him. She walked out of the hospital with her head high and her face white, and she walked very fast, not talking, her body stiff and brittle next to his.

He'd walked her legs off that night, but she didn't tire until nearly 5:00 a.m. He didn't take her home until that look was gone from her eyes and she was almost silly from weariness.

He knew what to do after that, how to judge her mood by her expression when he picked her up. On days she delivered babies she wasn't above cavorting in the streets. On certain days she wore anger like a protective shell. Unnecessary accidents, people who needlessly hurt each other, neglected children—he knew when she'd had those to contend with at work.

Joel answered every question she had, but very carefully asked none in return. He'd figured out that her ex-husband had been an overpossessive bastard who'd taught Claire

that love was squeezing the body and soul from a person. His ex-wife had been the same.

Oddly, he gained understanding of what their ex-spouses had felt, because he, too, wanted Claire, body and soul. There was a difference, though. He didn't want to change Claire or to smother her. He just wanted to love her, and more and more he was shaken by how powerful that desire grew.

"THE THING IS, Mom, you've got to stop using the garbage disposal as a wastebasket."

"I *didn't*. It was just one of those bread wrapper things. I figured it was tiny enough to go down."

Claire, kneeling on the counter with her head in the sink, muttered, "No more bread wrapper things!" She sat back on her heels, looking perky enough. Her red-checked shirt was rolled up at the cuffs, and tucked into a trim pair of navy cords. Her hairstyle was new as of yesterday. It wasn't a drastic change; but now there were spikes of bangs on her forehead.

Other changes included a whiff of spicy perfume around her throat and wrists, and a little more attention to makeup. It had recently occurred to Claire that over the past few years, she just might have let herself go. Not taken enough pride in her appearance.

The little changes were only for herself, and had nothing to do with Joel. Their time together had been irreplaceably special, only it was slightly disconcerting for a man to

make it very clear he wanted you, and then never make a single pass. Maybe once he'd gotten to know her, he'd no longer felt the attraction.

Then why the devil couldn't *she* stop feeling the chemistry? She wanted their friendship. But over the past few weeks, when his hand had touched her shoulder, or the small of her back, or her own hand, she'd felt a voltage overload that would have threatened the stability of Hoover Dam.

Claire's well-ordered world was tipping, and she was not happy. Frowning, she bent over and gave the screw one last furious turn. Success! With a relieved sigh, she sat back again, ran the water and turned on the disposal.

It gave its normal grating noise. Dot and Nora offered a round of applause. Walter started howling, and the noise blocked out the sound of a rap on the door.

Joel turned the knob, now knowing better than to wait for anyone to hear him. Dot hurled herself at him.

Claire rocked back on her heels, smiling.

"I came to take my favorite girl out to Saturday lunch," he told Dot. "At my place. If you want to come."

"Sure, Joel!"

"Mr. Brannigan," Nora automatically corrected.

He got his coffee and seated himself, listening to a double conversation from Nora and Dot.

His eyes skimmed over Claire. Her feet were delectably bare. He

noticed her new fringe of bangs, the movement of her breasts beneath the soft flannel shirt, the sexy curve of fanny outlined in her jeans and the soft natural red of her lips. He flashed her an easy-going smile.

"How come you want me to go to lunch with you?" Dot bit down on a cookie. "Aunt Claire hasn't seen where you live, either."

"Aunt Claire might not want to see my place."

"Did you ask her?"

"Aunt Claire . . ." Joel drawled. "Do you want to come home with us for peanut butter sandwiches?" Before she could answer, he whispered to Dot, "Hustle off and ask your mother if it's okay if you can go."

JOEL AND DOT finished the mad race up the nine flights of stairs first, then waited patiently for Claire. "We could have beat her even if she took the elevator, couldn't we, Joel?" Dot said.

"Now, the only thing we don't tease your aunt about is elevators, sweet." Joel ushered the two of them in. "How about if we let Claire relax and wander around a little, while you and I make lunch?"

"A surprise?" Dot pleaded.

"A total surprise," Joel agreed. "And your aunt may not come into the kitchen until we've finished."

Claire dropped her jacket on a chair and looked around. Being ignored had at least one side benefit. For a month a little bug of

curiosity had been driving her nuts, wondering what Joel's place looked like. His condo overlooked the Chicago River. That much, she'd expected. Joel loved the city.

His living-room furnishings rather startled her, though. He'd paid no decorator for perfection.

The huge room was a contrast of textures, from thick cream-colored carpet to rough, stuccoed walls. The corner fireplace was stone; around it were teak shelves. The huge couch was a leaf green, with cushions so thick a woman could drown in them. Old blended with new.

Claire decided to sit and wait for the other two. And then wandered toward the bathroom, because her hair needed a brush.

She brushed and rebrushed, looking around. Behind her was a sunken tub, scarlet red, big enough for two if not three. A hedonist's dream. Huge red towels looked softer than blankets, and each would certainly have wrapped around her twice.

She stepped on Joel's scale and nearly choked when it talked to her. "See a doctor immediately," droned the voice. "You lost eighty-three pounds since yesterday."

Flushed, she fled from the bathroom. The kitchen door was still closed. She relaxed. No more snooping, Claire, she thought.

Between the doors to the bathroom and the living room was a half-open door; she didn't step in, just looked. This was his office, with a desk, papers piled everywhere. He worked too hard, she

reflected absently, then jumped when she heard Joel's voice.

Her head whipped around to see him bearing down on her with a four-year-old in tow. "We're eating in the bedroom. Your niece has informed me that she's never allowed to get crumbs in bed. In this house, she is."

"Ah." Claire nodded sagely, following them to the far door. "You know, you told me to look around," she said. "I hope you didn't mind?"

"Course he doesn't mind, Aunt Claire," Dot giggled. "That's why he brought us here. I love it," she told Joel. "So does Aunt Claire. You want us to come live with you?"

"I..." Joel cleared his throat. "Your grandma would miss you too much."

"She could come, too."

Claire figured Joel could handle his way around most women, even four-year-old ones. She left him to it, staring in surprise at his bedroom. The carpet was scarlet and a huge bed took up the center of the room. Mirrored closets evidently hid his clothes and everything else. French doors led to a balcony overlooking the river, but all that filled her vision was that bed. And then the huge tray in the middle of it, followed by a reclining Joel and an urchin sitting Indian style.

"This is... quite a lunch," she said dryly.

A bowl of mixed cashews and raisins appeared to be the main course. Red grapes were the appe-

tizer. Tiny pieces of bread had been adorned with cheeses—Dot style, Claire suspected. "Sbrinz is Swiss," Joel told her. "The kash-kaval is a salty, Yugoslav cheese. Gouda's Dutch. And of course Brie."

"You have to try everything," Dot piped up.

Halfway through the meal, Dot wandered off to explore, coming back every minute or two to grab some food.

"I found him," Joel told Claire quietly, when the child was out of hearing range.

"Who?"

"Dot's father. He's moved twice from the address your sister had. It took some time to track him down." Joel dusted crumbs onto the tray. "Minnesota. Unmarried. Doing well for himself."

She'd forgotten his offer to do that, and was touched by the trouble he'd gone to. "You really think it would help if she saw him again?"

"Has the situation gotten better between Dot and your sister?"

Claire shook her head. "She seems determined to let a mistake with one man affect her whole life."

"Well, it could just be that Sandy'll turn herself around if she has to face what's really been bothering her. I think it's worth a try, Claire, but no matter what, stop worrying about Dot. That child will never hurt for love as long as you're in her world."

There was something in his face, a fierce look of protective tender-

ness—but it was gone, so quickly. He moved to put the lunch tray on the carpet, but before he'd straightened up, Dot had bounded to the bed and attacked him. Joel was ticklish. He demanded that Claire save him.

She wasn't so inclined, skimming fingers up and down his sides. His arm snaked out to grab her, and before she could protest, Joel straddled Claire's thighs, and ordered Dot to hold her hands so he could tickle her.

Only he didn't tickle her. Claire was laughing, breathless; so were the other two. She felt Joel's weight on her thighs. She saw him leaning over her, her breasts protruding up for him as Dot held her hands, and she saw his eyes, devil blue, inches from hers.

In that instant, she knew exactly how it would be if he made love with her. The weight of him. The disheveled look to his hair and the flush on his face. That searing blue in his eyes.

The moment was gone. Dot lamented loudly that he'd failed to tickle Claire silly as the two traipsed to the kitchen with the lunch tray. Glancing at her watch, Claire joined the clean-up crew. Both she and Joel had their heaviest workdays on Saturdays, and now they would both be late.

Less than ten minutes later the three were in their coats, and at the door.

"Is it okay with you if I ask Aunt Claire to come over next Tuesday to watch a football game?" Joel asked Dot.

"I hate football."

"That's why I thought I'd just ask your aunt."

"Aunt Claire," said Claire, "likes football. Only it's a little difficult to watch at the end of March."

"Not with a VCR. The Super Bowl. I taped it."

"Tuesday's Aunt Claire's day off," Dot said.

\*

"BRANNIGAN, I swear you're an overgrown child."

Joel violently shook the pan on the stove to the rhythm of kernels popping. "You can't watch the Super Bowl without Coors and popcorn," he insisted.

Flipping the lid on a Coors, she took a long draft, and then folded her arms loosely behind her head. "Five bucks on Montana," she said lightly.

"We already know the outcome," Joel growled.

"I think you should have gotten hold of a different game. Obviously, you're not going to survive Miami's downfall. How could you possibly not back Montana, anyway?"

She was totally relaxed, Claire at her most touchable. She hadn't balked at the invitation to spend a lazy afternoon alone with him. He'd carefully not bought firecrackers or champagne for the event, but the temptation had been there. Her trust had not been easy to win.

Sprawling back down beside her, he removed the popcorn bowl from

between them, and matched her crossed knee with his own. Her bare foot wagged like a puppy's tail whenever the game picked up. Her face flushed when she was excited. Her eyes brightened. Her breasts, alluring in the soft sweater, rose and fell with quick breaths. When she jammed her hands in her pockets, those breasts were squeezed together. When she threw an arm behind her neck, they pouted up for him. And when he hooked an arm around her shoulder, she leaned back against him, where he had a much better view of her breasts. And her hips. And her legs.

Claire's eyes stayed riveted to the screen, but her attention kept wandering to the man. He always made her conscious of his maleness. Joel was sure—of himself, and of his world.

She'd seen the world through his eyes for weeks. Nothing threw him. He was a man with whom one could be quiet. A man to enjoy a rousing argument. A man who could reach across a room with a smile.

A man she'd fallen in love with. Something she'd sworn she'd never do again.

Tucked up against him, she could feel her body growing warm and aware. Every once in a while his finger lifted to sift absently through her hair. Since that touch was in her hair, she wasn't absolutely sure why she felt it in between her legs. She couldn't seem to stop looking at his thighs. Like rock.

The room was suddenly unbearably hot. "If the Dolphins would quit trying to pass . . ." she muttered.

"Claire, they haven't had the ball in three plays."

She tilted her face up, expecting to see a teasing smile on Joel's face. There was no smile. And when had the room suddenly become so quiet? The game seemed to be coming from a long distance away.

His eyes filled her vision, as blue as the hottest flame, and her intuition picked up three facts of life. That his no-touch policy the past month had been a game, that his patience was over and that . . . he'd won.

An unconscious shiver rippled up and down her spine. Joel had clearly played a master game. He'd waited until it was too late for her to brush off her feelings for him as a fast affair.

Her heart was suddenly beating three times faster. He was even more of a dirty player than she'd thought.

His first kiss seemed to be an apology for that. His lips coaxed hers, skimmed over them. Like feast after famine, her senses absorbed the feel of the man close, and demanded more. It had been so long and she'd forgotten that his tongue was dangerous. It made her . . . forget things.

Joel slowly, almost reluctantly, raised his head. His eyes seared hers, searching her features. His hand reached back to a VCR

switch, and suddenly there was total silence.

Bright colors from the screen still reflected on his features, features drawn with a fierce effort at self-control, mirroring need and want. "Don't you dare tell me you don't want this," he said.

"I never said I didn't want you," she responded.

He shook his head. "And you know damn well that I need more than that," he whispered fiercely. "I want *all* of you, Claire, and that, sweetheart, is exactly what we're going to give each other."

His mouth covered hers, so roughly that her head reeled back. He slid his hands down her back, pulling her close, his palms cupping her bottom and cradling her to his thighs. His lips left hers only to explore her neck and throat, the softness of her hair.

A small sound escaped her lips. He slid a leg between hers, anchoring her, rubbing between her jeansed thighs. Pushing up her sweater, he changed their rhythm from fast to infinitely slow, taking time to caress the satin-smooth flat of her stomach. When he flicked open the catch of her bra, he was looking at her eyes.

Her whole face was flushed, her eyes turned sleepy. He was still looking in her eyes when his palms pushed open the fragile wisps of lace, baring her breasts.

"Stop...looking at me," she murmured.

He shook his head, found both tiny peaked nipples. He teased them between thumb and forefin-

ger, watching Claire's pupils dilate. Such exquisitely small breasts, infinitely firm and tender. They barely fit his palm, yet when his hand covered one, kneading the pearl-soft flesh, she restlessly closed her eyes. Leaning over, he shifted lower, lashing a tongue on those tender pink tips. Oh, she was sensitive.

His fingers slid beneath the waistband of her jeans, and she tensed.

"Shh." He raised up to kiss the pulse at her throat, then wandered back to her mouth. "We're not going to hurry. I'm not going to rush you, Claire. I just want to see your skin. All of you. Don't fight me."

"I wasn't," she whispered back. "I was just..." Her voice reflected a shyness that wasn't at all like Claire. "You'd think I'd never done this before. I... It isn't supposed to... feel like this."

He smiled. "We haven't even started, foolish one."

He didn't understand. She didn't...make love like that. Touch was a good thing; sexual feelings were a good thing. But not some fierce, terrible out-of-control wanting. He shed her sweater while murmuring to her. Then his sweatshirt, then her jeans. He kissed the skin he uncovered.

That was when she started trembling. After he skimmed off her jeans, when she felt his lips on her ankles, climbing up her calves, the touch of his tongue on her thighs. "Joel—"

He wanted too much. Intimacies that had never occurred to her, emotions she'd never felt with anyone else. She reached for him blindly, needing to stay the wild surge of dizzying sensations.

Her hands touched his chest, and her fingers were suddenly sift-ing through the curling hairs, then rushing over his skin. He came back up to her mouth. Her hands were already caught up in the knowing of him, and the feel of her bare breasts against his warm skin only fanned the flames.

She'd wanted him forever. And damn it, he knew. The more she touched, the more he rewarded her with long, flaming kisses. When her hands slid down to his jeans, she heard his harsh intake of breath.

He took them off, and it was her turn to breathe harshly. His skin was all dark gold. She saw the power of the man, the hard strength of him. She felt a lick of delicious fear, which only intensified when he slid back down beside her. He kissed her, once, gently on the lips. His hands cupped her face.

"I won't hurt you," he whispered.

"I know that." She let a single finger trace the grave lines of his face. He was so beautiful. And so full of wanting.

The rough feel of carpet beneath her contrasted to the endless softness of his tongue, the silken caress of his hands. Restlessly she surged beneath his probing fingers, her hands seeking to find and

caress him with the same seductive power. Every part of her ached. Her heart. Her soul.

"Joel..."

He was a stranger, a fierce primitive warrior poised over her, his power absolute. She could see the moisture on his mouth from the intimate kiss she'd allowed no man. She could see the small damp bruise on his shoulder, the mark of her teeth that she hadn't been able to control. And when he surged inside her body, filling that feminine hollow, she let out a low, fierce moan of yearning, as pagan and abandoned as Eve.

His palms raised her hips, and he drove inside her, filling her again, deeper this time, and then deeper again. "Look at me," he whispered.

Glazed eyes sought his.

"So tight, so warm," he murmured. "Do you know how long I've wanted to be inside you?"

Her lashes darted down.

"No," he whispered. "Don't look away. I want to watch you. I want you to see how good you feel to me, and I want to watch you cry out...."

He kept whispering, wonderful, intimate things. No one had ever told her such things. No man had ever made her feel so desirable, so desperately wanted. Her skin was so hot.

Tension kept climbing, centered in her most feminine part. She felt...invaded. He wasn't just making love to her body, but also to her mind, her soul. He touched

her wanton core; he sapped inhibitions.

She heard herself murmuring his name, over and over. Light and darkness. Color like rainbows, and then release, like a torrent of spring-cooled rain. Claire was bewildered to find tears in her eyes that Joel was kissing away. "You never believed it would be less between us, did you?" he murmured.

IT WAS STILL DARK, but that muzzy predawn dark. Lying on her side, Claire slid an arm from beneath Joel's body to pull the sheet up over his shoulders.

Sitting up, she studied him with love for endless minutes. The last thing she wanted to do was get up and leave him, but she knew she had to.

After they'd made love the first time, Joel had made dinner and brought it back to the living room. They hadn't eaten it.

He'd carried her into the bedroom. Twice and then a third time they'd made love, and in between Joel had served wine, toasting her in the darkness, making her laugh. She'd never imagined a lover like him, both earthy and sensual, tender and savage. He gave... everything.

And demanded everything in return.

She could feel soreness in her most feminine part. She could still feel the whisker-burn on her breasts, the reddened spot on her throat where he'd nuzzled too roughly. Worse, she knew she'd

made marks on his body she'd never in her life made on a man.

Slowly she edged from the bed. For hours now she'd lain in the darkness, a nameless panic gripping and twisting her heart. He'd whispered that she should have known how it would be between them.

She had known. Making love, Joel had claimed her, body and soul. She loved him with her whole heart. And felt such despair.

She silently slipped on her clothes in the darkness, then let herself out of his apartment.

Shadows chased her down the lonely flights of stairs. Shadows of inadequacy, that no matter how much she gave before, it had never been enough. Feelings of being cornered, and of being closed in.

"GOOD HEAVENS, you're up early." Nora yawned from the kitchen doorway.

"Hmm. Coffee's ready, and French toast is on the way." Claire's voice was deliberately cheerful, but she quickly turned from her mother's shrewd gaze.

A few minutes later the kitchen spilled over with noise. Claire was thankfully too busy to think. Wednesday was a nursery-school day for Dot; she'd put on a polka-dotted sweater and striped pants, and started wailing when Nora insisted she change.

Walter lifted his head to howl in sympathy. Sandy appeared in the doorway, her eyes sleepy but well made-up. She wore a smart red

wool suit that didn't handle a cup of coffee spilled on it well.

"Mother!"

Nora had been too busy studying her elder daughter to watch what she was doing. Now she looked at Sandy with a stricken face.

Claire poured a second cup of coffee and urged her new midnight-blue dress on her sister.

"Claire..." Nora started to say, but was interrupted when Dot returned in a red plaid blouse to match her purple-striped sweater. The French toast was burning when the back door opened.

"Joel!" Dot flung herself at him. "Stop them making me change clothes! You know I look beautiful!"

He just stood there, glaring at Claire. "I want to know what happened," he said in a low voice.

"I..." Flustered, she looked away. How on earth was she supposed to answer him, anyway? Nora had removed the French toast and left the griddle on the open flame. Smoke was whispering out from beneath it. Sandy was chasing after Dot to change her clothes again, and when Walter stepped in as Dot's defender, Sandy tripped over him and cannoned into Joel. Nora was standing there with two cups of coffee, ready to offer one to Joel.

"Claire!"

Now what on earth did the man expect her to do, talk above the chaos? She saved the griddle and turned down the flame, and all the time her heart was tripping over it-

self, trying to find words. There were no words.

"Where's Joel?" Dot demanded.

"Mr. Brannigan," corrected Nora wearily.

Claire lifted her head, her face white. He was gone.

He *had* expected her to answer him over the chaos. He'd expected her to value their relationship over anything else. It wasn't reasonable. He wasn't a reasonable man.

"Where did he go, Claire?" Sandy asked.

Out of her life. That was all, just...out of her life. Claire stood stock-still. Then she grabbed her coat.

A brisk wind whipped at her hair as she rushed outside. Joel was backing out of the drive at racing speed. She thought he wasn't going to stop...until she heard the screech of brakes.

Fear of loss drowned instantly in a fury of relief. Claire barreled around the front of his car and leaned in, her gray eyes snapping. "You could have waited thirty-seven seconds! You could see the whole house was in an uproar—"

"What I could see is that you were hiding behind a pile of noise." Blue eyes seared hers. "I don't have time for games, Claire, I told you that before."

"Well, aren't you holier than a saint? You set me up last night, Brannigan," Claire accused. "You knew well I wasn't expecting—"

"To make love? You should have been. Now get in."

She hesitated, then hustled around the front of the car and climbed in stiffly. "I was wrong, running out on you," she said, her voice low.

"Yes."

"It wasn't that last night wasn't special."

"Last night was damn well more than special. And you know it."

"I'm trying to apologize. Quit snapping at me." But Claire could see that his anger was fading. "And where on earth are you driving?"

"The same place I would have taken you if we'd woken up together. Wednesday mornings I have a commitment that it's past time you knew about."

Joel stopped the car by a three-story brick building. It might have been a school at one time. Tenements surrounded it. Factory haze hung like clouds over threadbare wash hanging from open windows; trash and debris huddled around the curbs.

The minute Joel stepped out of the car, a sullen-faced teenager moved out of the shadows. Money was exchanged. Claire understood that the boy was being paid to baby-sit Joel's car while they went inside.

Joel opened the far door to the sound of raucous laughter. The gym had seen better days, but the basketball hoops at both ends looked brand-new. There were at least fifteen kids, all dressed in jeans and sneakers and worn T-shirts. Sixteen appeared to be the average age, though they had that

dead-eyed, streetwise hostility in their eyes of children who'd been adults since they were born. A basketball was winging its way across the court, and the play stopped only when Joel was spotted.

"Hey, man. You're late."

"Who's the chick?"

"This your woman, man?"

Joel was setting a bag down, and taking off his jacket. "This is Claire," he introduced. "You ever see her in this part of town, you make sure no one messes with her."

"Like no sweat."

"You ready to work out?" Joel demanded.

"Hey, we been ready all morning. You're late."

Claire, deserted, climbed several tiers of the bleachers while the play started. The boys played basketball as if it were a war. Joel was their general. Within fifteen minutes T-shirts were stripped and tossed on the bench one by one, and bodies returned to the court to sweat in earnest.

Before the hour was done, faces were glistening and chests heaving. By the time Joel ordered the boys to the showers, she couldn't imagine why they looked at him with such adoration.

Joel ambled toward the bleachers, wiping his damp forehead. He grinned and glanced at his watch. "Give me five minutes to take a shower. I promise, no more—"

He didn't make it to the shower before kids started filtering back out. Claire watched curiously as

each came up to Joel, pulled out some kind of book or magazine and waited while he wrote in a small black book.

When the last boy had left the gym, Joel pocketed his pen, walking toward Claire. "Do you have five more minutes of patience left so I could still get that shower?"

"You haven't heard me complaining yet, have you?"

"Five..." He started to promise again, and stopped. "Come on. There're a few people up on the second floor, where they're putting together a halfway house for runaways. But there's no one around down here. You can come in with me." He reached for her hand.

She shook her head. "I'm not going in a men's locker room."

It seemed she was. Even though he locked the door, there was something about invading such a distinctly male sanctum that made her nervous. Then Joel deserted her with a "Make yourself at home. I've got to get a towel."

"What were you doing, with the books and magazines?" she called after him.

"The kids have to read the equivalent of a book a week or they don't get to play," Joel said from behind a locker partition. "Half the time they bring in girlie magazines. I don't care as long as they master the printed page. Most of them dropped out without ever getting through *Dick and Jane*."

"Why are you involved?"

Except for a white towel draped on his shoulders, Joel walked

around the corner stark naked, then into the open shower room. "To answer your question...this is my neighborhood. Where I grew up."

A small lump formed in her throat. She had a sudden image of a very young Joel, a lonely frightened boy wandering those dangerous streets outside. Toughness was a defense he'd learned early, weakness something he'd never tolerate in himself. For others, he could be patient, understanding and gentle. But who had ever taken care of Joel?

Barely a few minutes had passed before he flipped off the water. Claire stepped forward to hand him the towel he had tossed on the floor, and found herself using it to wipe the water from his face.

His eyes snapped open on hers, gleaming blue. "Personal service?"

Her eyes shifted from his. She went behind him, using the towel on his neck and shoulders. "No one can dry their own back."

"I've been drying mine since my first shower."

"You've undoubtedly been arguing since then, too."

"I'm not," Joel said quietly, "arguing."

No, Claire thought absently. He was standing absolutely still while she dried his back. The man was beautiful. The wide sweep of his shoulders, the power of his lean muscles...

Joel turned, stealing the towel from her. As he finished the job, he looked at her.

"No," she said swiftly.

He tossed the towel down.

"No, Joel! You're crazy. We're in a *locker room*."

"I liked the way you dried my back."

"I can see that." Color climbed her cheeks.

"Exactly." He took another step forward.

"Joel!"

"What?"

"I don't trust the look in your eyes."

"You're responsible. Now you pay the price."

He meant no more than to claim a kiss, to tease more laughter from her. But then she passionately responded, her hands sliding up around his neck, her lips parting expectantly. She shouldn't have done that.

"Your skin is cold," she whispered.

"So warm me." Her windbreaker was half unzipped; he undid the rest and pushed it off her shoulders. A soft yellow sweater was under it, tucked into her jeans. When his mouth lowered on hers, she leaned back against the wall for balance.

"Joel . . ." Her voice was breathless.

"You belong to me. In the oldest way a woman can belong to a man," he whispered. "That's what you think you're afraid of, Claire."

He skimmed the sweater over her head and then bent down, his lips roaming in her hair, her temples, down to her throat. "You

think I don't know what it is to be smothered, sweet. But I do. Those kids I showed you today are closed in by their whole world. I've been closed in. I've been in relationships where I was the only one doing the compromising. I love you, Claire, but loving you doesn't mean I want to own you. Wanting—needing—you to belong to me is something else."

His palm slid up her waist. A finger discovered the front catch of her bra and unsnapped it. A breast tumbled into his palm, as if waiting for the gentle kneading it promptly received.

Her breath caught in her throat. They were in a locker room, she reminded herself.

His hands unsnapped her jeans zipper, then slipped inside to bare flesh, molding her to him. She already knew that he was aroused. She just hadn't felt how much. Her fingers clenched in his hair and she rubbed deliberately against him. If Joel could be crazy, so could she. She wooed his mouth back to hers, nibbled his lips the way he'd nibbled hers, tasted and sipped and savored and darted her tongue inside.

Her hands turned teasing, skimming his sides, fingertips dancing around his thighs. She broke off the kiss, and traced a pattern with her tongue on his throat, down to his flat nipples nestled in crisp dark hair.

"Claire." His tone was distinctly guttural.

Her smile was sinful. Immoral bliss, knowing she was responsible

for the smoky look in his eyes. "Don't you Claire me. You started this."

"I admit that. But if you continue to touch me that way—"

"I'm going to continue to touch you that way." For a moment she stared with detachment at the pile of clothes on the cement floor. They seemed to be hers. "Joel?"

A fierce raw ache filled her when his hands stroked intimate territory. "Joel, this seemed like a good idea...."

"Hmm?"

"But there's nowhere... It isn't possible."

His head tilted back, eyes dark. "Between a man and a woman, there's very little that isn't possible," he whispered.

His lips came down on hers in an endless drugging kiss. As her arms swept helplessly around him, she felt his hands on her hips, lifting her. For a moment she was suspended in midair, then his smooth warm heat slid inside her feminine core. A low moan of surprise and pleasure escaped her lips.

Her legs wrapped around him instinctively; her back grazed against the wall for balance. "You can't..."

"You're mine, Claire. Try and tell me that isn't what you want."

She couldn't tell him anything. The moment had been full of play, but it was suddenly something else. Their lips were clinging as if the end of the world were close. She was trembling all over.

With his hands on her hips, he moved her in that ancient love

rhythm. She'd known nothing like it before. Their eyes were inches from each other. She could see the moisture dot his forehead, the strain he bore from holding her weight, the fierce blue of his eyes. Her cheek fell to his shoulder, and she felt his lips whispering in her hair, on her temples.

"So sweet," he murmured. "So much fire. Let go, Claire. Let it happen. Let me love you...."

Her fingers tangled in his hair, and she'd never felt more vulnerable in her life. She could feel his body tighten, and soared like a swallow let free, her spine arching back, her legs wrapped tightly around him. A splash of sky, and then Joel's fierce kiss.

Slowly, he lifted her up and then down until her feet touched ground. "No tears," he whispered.

"I wasn't crying," she lied.

He dried the crystal under her right eye with his thumb, then her left, then just held her close.

In time, she realized how tightly she was holding him. "Brannigan?"

"Hmm?"

"We really have to get out of here before someone catches us."

"You should have thought of that before, Doc." And he leveled one last kiss on her mouth. When he lifted his head, she saw the darkness in his eyes. "I love you," he said quietly, "body and soul, Claire. I need and want you the same way. Don't try to pretend it's less than that."

*I LOVE YOU body and soul.* The words echoed through her working hours in emergency. It was a quiet night. Two car accidents. An old woman with arthritis.

In between were long spaces of silence, when all she could do was think about Joel. It seemed so simple. She'd never loved anyone more, but she couldn't misunderstand the warning he'd given her. He wanted a commitment; he would take nothing less.

For four years she'd told herself she didn't believe in that kind of love. Not violets-in-spring kind of love, not all-or-nothing passion, not this obsessive desire to be always within touching distance, not rainbows.

Joel was waiting for her after work. He looked wretchedly tired, with huge circles under his eyes. She knew she looked no better. He drove in silence until they reached her driveway.

When he stopped the car, she leaned over, eyes soft, and pressed a single kiss on his lips. "If there was any question in your mind...I love you, too," she murmured. "And I'm trying to lay my ghosts to rest. Would you be patient a little longer?"

\*

BY TEN O'CLOCK Saturday night, Joel's staff had figured out that it was wise to stay out of his way. An irritable frown hadn't left his brow in hours.

His chefs had decided it was a good night to show temperament over a cranberry-ginger sauce.

Since Harry and Geraldine regularly threatened to quit over who was the superior cook, Joel was used to handling them. It was just one of those nights when he would have preferred to knock their heads together and be done with it.

Lorene, the singer, had called in sick. The substitute was packing in customers at the bar in her see-through dress, but she had the voice of a flat hen.

A waiter had dumped a full tray of dinners in the middle of the restaurant.

The maître d's wife was pregnant and George had been confusing reservations for two days now. Customers stacked up waiting for tables that should have been ready did not make Joel happy.

They'd run out of bourbon, requiring a quick purchase run, and by ten, Joel had a headache. Only to ask for more punishment did he decide to poke his nose once again in the kitchen, and there he found Harry and Geraldine...chattering in sudden remarkable harmony.

The source of that harmony was seated on the counter, dressed in whites with her feet swinging. Claire had a pastry in one hand and a chicken bone in the other.

For the first time in hours, Joel felt a lazy, relaxed grin forming on his face.

"This isn't my fault," Claire managed to say. "I came here to see you. I could only grab an hour for my dinner break, and when Harry heard that he dragged me in here."

As fast as she had a napkin whisked on her hands and lips, Joel was lifting her down from the counter.

"You are both extremely wonderful cooks in spite of your insults," she told the two on exiting. "The best food I've ever tasted. He's paying you fairly?"

The swinging door closed on the sound of their laughter. His office door closed seconds later, with the two of them inside. "Are you expecting a kiss hello?" asked Joel.

"Why else do you think I came here? And since I have to be back at the hospital in twenty-three minutes, you'd better make it fast."

He obliged, taking a tender bite of her neck.

"Lips, Brannigan."

"In a minute. I'll work my way up there."

In time, he raised his head. Her eyes were shimmering by then. "In the meantime, sir—" Claire popped out from under his arm "—the real reason I'm here is to deliver a major thank-you where my sister is concerned."

"She saw her Greg?"

Claire shot him a wry look. "You know darn well she saw Greg. You set it up."

He ignored that. "What happened?"

"Sandy ended a relationship that was and always would have been bad for her. As far as her relationship with Dot... It'll take time," she said simply, "but I believe my sister will end up a good mother. You were right. Sandy

needed to see Greg again. And you were also right, someone should have taken direct action a long time ago. Brannigan?"

"Hmm?" He could feel a chuckle starting just from the expression on her face.

"I can't stand men who are always right."

FROWNING, Claire leaned over to brush on eyeshadow and mascara. She stood back to review the results.

Dramatic. But it was tough dredging up enthusiasm for an obligatory hospital personnel party.

"Let's see," Dot piped up from behind her.

Claire obediently turned.

Dot looked her up and down. "Beautiful," she judged. "Not as beautiful as my mom, but you can't help that, Aunt Claire." She trailed Claire back to the bedroom. "You know, I'd be glad to go with you to the party, but Mom and I are making popcorn tonight."

"Much more important," Claire agreed gravely, as she stepped into her gown. It was emerald-colored, raw silk, with full feminine sleeves that buttoned tight at the cuff, and a low square neckline that set off her great-grandmother's green garnet. Very sexy, she thought glumly to herself.

Her off-mood was inexplicable. Everything had been going wonderfully for almost two weeks. Her sister's laughter rang through the house as it hadn't in years; Dot

couldn't keep a grin off her face. Claire's work was the challenge and reward it always was. Joel's lovemaking the day before... well...

"I hear the bell," Dot announced. "Want me to let Joel in?"

"Would you, poppet?" Joel would make a boring evening sparkle for her, she already knew that. But the unsettled mood wouldn't leave her. The day before, after they'd made love, Joel had pressed for a wedding date. Preferably tomorrow. She felt exactly as he did, that there was no point in waiting. Claire wanted his child; she wanted her things next to his in the closet... and to feel that threat of being closed in was absurd.

And she didn't feel it, she convinced herself. She just felt uneasy.

Joel had her more cheerful by the time they arrived at the town-house. If he didn't know the cause of her rare unsettled mood, he guessed part of it. Claire liked one-on-one with people and felt nervous in a crowd.

"I just never know what to say to these people," she murmured.

And immediately proved herself wrong. Joel watched, proud of her, as various doctors and their wives came over to greet her. She might hate the attention, but her colleagues clearly appreciated her.

She was separated from him in a matter of minutes. Joel didn't mind. For the first half hour, he kept an eye on Claire. For the next

half hour he kept an eye on the men, since most of them seemed to gravitate in her direction at one time or another. His mood altered abruptly. Doctors were supposed to be paragons of good breeding; he'd never guessed she worked with such a den of wolves. Before that hour had passed, he saw several kisses delivered to Claire.

She returned to his side many times in the next half hour, still holding the same martini she'd started with... and was whisked away as fast as she'd arrived. A doctor he knew damn well was married—he *looked* married—dragged Claire off to a corner to discuss some medical technique. Joel might not know medicine but he knew techniques just fine.

No one showed the least inclination to leave at nine, when the party was supposed to be over. By nine-ten he saw Claire swiftly trying to make her way to him, her eyes sparkling with good humor. She grabbed his arm and whispered, "Can we bump this pop stand? We've been good long enough."

She expected a quick come-back, but Joel didn't give her one. Still smiling, she said a rapid succession of goodbyes while Joel fetched her cape. A few moments later they were outside.

The air was tantalizing with that special drug of spring. "You were an angel to put up with two hours of that nonsense," she told Joel as they got into the car.

"Hmm."

Claire, suddenly aware of Joel's taciturn silence, asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She stared at him for a moment, startled at the marble set to his features, the stiff way he drove. "Something is," she said quietly.

Joel fell silent. "You looked beautiful tonight."

"Thank you. Only why am I getting the impression that's a criticism instead of a compliment?"

"It was a compliment, obviously." He shot her a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes.

Claire leaned back her head, smiling, watching him. "I saw the doctors' wives hanging all over you half the time. You were by far the sexiest man there, and I was afraid you were going to have your ego irreparably enlarged by the time I got back to you."

"And was yours?" Joel asked smoothly. "I noticed there wasn't a man who wasn't drooling over the neckline of your dress."

Claire turned to ice. She heard the jealousy in Joel's voice, and felt as if a ghost had just slapped her on the face. "I don't believe my neckline is overly low."

"I didn't say it was."

"You seemed to imply I was...teasing other men."

"No. I was implying that you attracted other men. Which you do, and which is natural, with your looks and personality. Oh hell," Joel sighed, "that comment was out of line. Just give me a minute, would you? Jealousy hit me hard."

The way that newly married chief of staff looked at you, I wanted to deck him."

Claire considered telling him that she'd been working with that married man for the last five years, and that he'd never made a pass. But she didn't. Instead she simply closed her eyes tight for a moment, and felt sick. *Déjà vu* hit hard. She opened her eyes to find Joel frowning at her, the car at a stoplight near her house.

"I would like to get out," she said clearly. She didn't wait, just pulled the door handle and pelted out of the car. Her heels clicked on the pavement. Her lungs hauled in air, and she suddenly felt as if she couldn't get enough.

Behind her, she heard the squeak of brakes, a car door slam, a man's footsteps. Joel's hands circled her shoulders, whirled her around. "What the hell is going on?" he demanded fiercely. "I was jealous. I meant no lack of faith in you—"

"Not now maybe," she said wearily.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Joel." She shook her head helplessly, trying to blink back the tears. "It always starts that way, with little things. Only then it just gets worse. It's no good. I won't be...smothered again." Tears suddenly fell freely. "Let me go," she said softly.

"No."

"Joel. Let me alone. You're hurting me—"

Abruptly he released her wrists.

"I love you," she said swiftly. "But it's not enough. I can't live with that constant fear of being closed in." Abruptly she swiveled around and started walking, her head high, tears flowing down her cheeks.

He didn't follow her. She could feel him standing there, alone under the streetlight, his eyes searing her back. She didn't hear him start his car. She crossed the street to the block where her house was, and kept walking. She wanted to wipe the tears from her face, but was too proud. He'd see the gesture.

A huge lock turned on the empty heart in her chest. She'd known it would happen. Men understood all about independence until they had a commitment. Then the possessive games began. She'd only fooled herself, thinking it would be different with Joel.

God, she hurt. The only thing that kept her world from splintering was knowing it could never happen again. There would never be another man after Joel.

FOR THE NEXT few days Dot crawled on Claire's lap, offering fierce hugs for no reason at all. Walter followed her from room to room whenever she was home, leaned against her whenever she sat down. At work, Janice started bringing her homemade soup for breaks.

A week later, Claire's sister stopped in the doorway to her bedroom on a Sunday morning. "You know," Sandy said slowly, "you've kept this family together

ever since Dad died. Every once in a while you could let a few of us help you back. Can't you talk, sis?"

A week after that Nora closed the kitchen doors and served Claire hot tea. "Have I ever told you how often your father and I argued?" she asked. "You can't really love someone without learning how to fight with them. If a relationship always went smooth as glass, you'd be bored to bits."

Since Claire was smiling, and carrying on as usual, she couldn't quite figure out how they all knew. Makeup hid the shadows under her eyes. Anyone could have a sudden plunge in appetite.

Midnights were the worst times. It was coming out of the hospital doors and finding no one there. She kept telling herself that if she got to the point where she stopped looking for him, the rest would fall into place again. Only she couldn't seem to get to that point.

"JUST KEEP CALM," Claire said firmly. "I'll find it."

She again aimed the flashlight at the fusebox, and glanced back to her audience. Sitting on an old table in the basement, Nora, Sandy and Dot were lined up like patient schoolchildren. The bloodhound was next to them. All were looking at her expectantly, knowing she'd find the fuse that affected the kitchen light upstairs.

Their house was old, with the kind of fuses that had little windows and metal clips. Claire had to

find the one with the broken clip, only none of them looked broken.

"You should all know how to do this yourselves," she said irritably.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs made everyone except the dog freeze. He hurled himself in a frightened mass at Claire.

Biting her lip, she flicked up the flashlight to the intruder's face, and instantly dropped it. It was Joel, his face white under that sudden flash of light, his eyes blue and searing like hollow flame. He looked exhausted. And beautiful.

"I've got it," he murmured and grabbed the rolling flashlight. Shoulder to shoulder, he leaned next to Claire, facing the fusebox. "We may have to try these out one by one."

"Yes."

Swiftly he substituted new fuses for old, waiting to see if the light flicked on in the kitchen. Claire stood in absolute stillness beside him, staring at the fuses as if she'd never seen anything so fascinating. On the sixth try, the light reflected down the stairway, and a roar of applause sounded behind them. Just as quickly, the four bolted for the stairs without a single glance back except for Dot, who muttered a "Hi, Joel!" before her mother carted her up the rest of the way.

"But why can't I—" echoed from the distance until the door was firmly closed.

"There must be some reason they want us locked in this basement," Joel murmured, tossing the

broken fuse in his hand absently. "Take it easy, Claire," he said quietly. "I didn't come here to talk or pressure you. I only came here because of your claustrophobia."

"Pardon?"

"There's a cure. If you can spare an hour, I suggest you give it a chance."

She couldn't seem to think. "An hour..."

"I don't see how it could possibly hurt you to try." Joel's tone was almost formal.

Hesitantly, she said, "All right."

Upstairs, she went to the front hall for a spring jacket while Joel waited. "I'm going out for a while," she said.

"All right, Claire."

The voices were in unison, all faces wreathed in innocent smiles. Claire considered killing the lot of them. Her cheeks red, she followed Joel to his car, but he didn't say anything. Actually he didn't say anything until they reached his place.

"We have to go up to my office," he told her.

Trepidation was replaced by a terrible feeling of disappointment. His office. Of course.

She couldn't think of anything she was less interested in at the moment than her claustrophobia, but she couldn't seem to talk. Her eyes were glued to him.

She wanted to apologize, to take back her harsh words the night of the party. She wanted to explain that she was capable of being totally irrational on that certain subject. These past two weeks she'd

learned something terribly painful. Running from hurt was no escape from it, because life wasn't much worth breathing without him.

But she said nothing, because her throat was full, and she was afraid that if she bridged past she'd cry. Maybe...in a few minutes. Or maybe...if he'd just look more approachable.

"Stairs..." He urged her up, and then didn't say a word as she mounted nine sets of them, with him trailing behind her. "You know where the office is."

She nodded, and started walking there. She stopped in the doorway, rather startled at the look of the room. Suits and shirts still on their hangers were strewed on desk and chairs. She glanced back.

"Do you think you can manage to trust me for a good ten minutes?" he asked evenly.

"Dammit. Of course," she said irritably.

"Good. In here, then."

The door looked part of the paneling, until he swung it open. Never having guessed there was a room beyond the office, she stepped forward curiously. Too late, she heard Joel close the door with the two of them inside.

"What is this?" she demanded lowly.

The walk-in closet was windowless, and except for cream-colored carpeting and a light bulb, totally empty. The walls started closing in.

"You said you'd trust me," Joel reminded her.

"I do trust you."

"And do you love me?"

"Yes. Yes!" She added in a desperate rush, "Joel. Get me out of here so we can talk."

"In a minute."

His arms reached out and plucked her from that terribly cold place. She was clinging even before his mouth layered on hers.

Rough hands pushed open the buttons of her blouse, unsnapped her bra, flipped open the snap of her jeans. The man was in a hurry. A shiver vibrated through Claire, from the fierce look in his eyes.

"Touch me," he whispered. "Now, Claire."

The easiest thing he could possibly have asked her to do. His skin...she'd missed the warmth and texture of his skin. Body and soul this man was hers, and hers alone. She'd never understood possessiveness before, but she knew it now, and reveled in it. Where she touched, his flesh grew warmer; his muscles tightened; his breathing changed. All for her. By the time she worked down to the snap on his jeans, she no longer had any clothes on. He had far too many. Not for long.

Carpet cushioned her back, but she couldn't remember falling. "Look around you," Joel whispered.

She looked the only place that mattered, and saw his eyes, full of love, a fierce desperate blue. His head ducked down, his mouth nuzzling the soft flesh of her neck, trailing down to her breasts. His palm slid down to the silken hair between her thighs as his tongue

swirled her nipples, making them ache, making them hurt with longing.

"Joel—"

"You know where you are?"

Of course she knew where she was. With him. But not close enough yet. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry, Joel. I was wrong. No, I don't expect you to be perfect. For that matter, I would have reacted exactly the same way if I saw you kissing another woman...."

He didn't seem to be listening. Her eyes closed and her neck arched back, helplessly drawn to a world where words had no meaning.

Only the senses—touch and taste and hearing—had meaning. Only...Joel. And for a man who'd shown no more patience than the devil a few moments before, he suddenly turned lazy and lingering. Her hands skidded down his sides, slippery, hot, urging him to take her.

In time, he shifted her beneath him. As he drove into her, her first muffled gasp of pleasure was drowned in his mouth.

There seemed no end. Ripples and waves of heat flowed and ebbed, all in a fierce welcomed rhythm. Her skin grew slick, so did his, in a fierce, violent explosion...of softness.

"ARE YOU GOING to open your eyes?" Joel whispered.

Claire smiled and snuggled closer. "Why," she murmured dryly, "are we in a closet?"

"To prove something to you." Joel's fingers pushed back her hair. "When we're together, sweet, you don't feel closed in. It's different for you and me. I don't give a damn how it was for you and anyone else. This is us, Claire. I had to try to make you see the difference."

"I saw," she whispered. "Joel—"

"I don't want to make demands on you," he interrupted swiftly. "Your job does that, your family does that. I want to be the man you want to come home to, to get away from just those kinds of emotional demands. I want to be the man you feel free to be yourself with. Where all the pressures go away, and you just feel..."

"Loved?" She stared at him with luminous eyes. "I feel loved, Joel, body and soul. And I love you that same way."

"Be sure," he whispered.

"I'm sure."

"Be sure *long* term. I'm talking gray hair now."

A soft smile curled her lips. "If you want to see how fast I'll marry you, Brannigan," she whispered, "see how fast you can get me out of this closet."

Joel sat up. A teasing frown arched his brows. "I thought we'd cured that claustrophobia. Because if not..."

Laughing, she pulled him back down beside her.



# SUZANNE CAREY

## Kiss and Tell



**Tom Courtenay was the man who'd sworn to  
sabotage her writing project! And yet, Jenna  
could not resist him for long....**

Jenna Martin stepped out of the cab into the sleet and slush of Chicago on a January afternoon. As usual, O'Hare Airport traffic in the early dusk was a crush of cars and buses. Ducking inside the double glass doors, she smoothed her windblown, honey-blond hair back into its braided chignon. At least it won't be sleeting in Florida, she thought. It was the most she could say for the assignment.

Four months ago both her parents and her brother Andy had been killed in a plane crash over the Atlantic as they returned from a European holiday. Now nothing much really mattered—not even the coveted Illinois Press Club award she'd received for her behind-the-scenes profile of a former Cook County state's attorney who had become governor. She wanted only to bury herself in trivia and safe routine.

"Gate twenty-nine, 'B' Concourse," the airline agent was saying, as if for the second time. "Here's your ticket, miss." He held out the magenta-and-white envelope.

Taking it, she turned, nearly colliding with a tall man in a fleece-lined suede jacket. She had a fleeting impression of dark, straight hair, and eyes a most unusual shade of aquamarine.

"Oh... pardon me," she said a bit lamely.

"Excuse me, ma'am." His voice, smooth and deep, held just a trace of Southern accent.

Clutching her carry-on luggage, she stepped around him and hurried to her gate. Only a few seats were still available. She selected an aisle seat as far forward as she could. Then, taking a place in the waiting area, Jenna sat quietly. Outside sleet rattled against the thick terminal windows.

Glancing back at the waiting area, she noted that the man with the Western hat and aquamarine eyes had arrived at the check-in counter. A moment later, he took a seat directly across the room. Jenna thought he raised one brow at her speculatively for a moment before unfolding his newspaper.

Andy crooked his brows a bit like that, she remembered, suddenly devastated. For a moment she was swimming in the pain of it again, listening to news of the crash fall in leaden words from her Uncle Gene's mouth while her Aunt Sylvie stood by, helpless.

It was her Uncle Gene who had assumed his brother's place at the helm of CM Corporation, parent company of half a dozen thriving city magazines.

And it was Gene Martin who'd insisted she take on the Tyrell assignment.

"I sent Ed Tyrell your piece about the 'guv' and he liked it well enough to let you do his story *and* stay at his ranch," her uncle had told her. "He's not an easy nut to crack and he doesn't usually give interviews. It's time for a piece on Tyrell that shows the man as he really is, and his eightieth birthday is the best news peg we're going to get."

Gene Martin had lit a cigar as he'd gazed out his window at the Tribune Tower across the way. "Anyway," he'd continued, "the change of scene'll do you good."

Her head had come up at that.

Her Uncle Gene's arm came round her. "You know, your daddy once interviewed Tyrell when he was a fresh-out-of-school reporter on the Tallahassee *Democrat*," he'd said softly. "The old man remembers him."

Now, sitting in the air terminal, about to embark on the assignment, she wasn't sure she'd made a wise choice. The tragedy, she felt, had left her too burnt out to write.

Oh, Tyrell was quotable, she knew—if he would let you quote him. A dazzling manipulator in his prime, he could tell you inside out and firsthand about every important political deal cut in Florida during the past forty-five years—if he would tell the truth. But Ed T., as his friends called him, and his wily complexity weren't the only problems. His family, her uncle

had admitted, was opposed to the article.

There was a twenty-nine-year-old grandson, Edward Yancey Tyrell, called Neddy, a playboy without much business sense, who might be a possible source. And there was seventy-six-year-old Aunt Bliss, who could offer some stories.

But the rest of the family would be closemouthed. Foremost among them would be Ed T.'s only living son and right-hand man, Duke. At thirty-four, he was a heartbreaker with women, by all accounts, and a hard-as-nails businessman-rancher. In all but title now he was the man who oversaw the family's citrus and cattle interests. Of all the Tyrells, her uncle had said, Duke was the most dead set against the story project.

She started as the airline agent began calling the passengers to the gate.

To her surprise, the man with the aquamarine eyes halted beside her as she settled into her seat on the plane. He was glancing at his ticket and at the seat numbers displayed overhead. Finally his eyes met hers.

"Pardon me," he said politely in that deep voice of his.

They made the transfer in the narrow space, brushing up against each other in the process. Jenna caught the alluring aroma of a mossy after-shave. For a purely sensual moment, she wondered what it would be like to be kissed by this enticing stranger, held fast in those powerful-looking arms. A

few minutes later they were pulling away from the terminal.

When the stewardess came around she allowed the tall Southerner to order her a vodka Collins. His own choice was Scotch on the rocks. Their hands touched as they reached simultaneously for their glasses, and she felt an inescapable little thrill from the contact.

"I suppose we should introduce ourselves," she said after a moment. "I'm Jenna Martin and I work for *Second City* magazine." She nodded at the issue that lay open in her lap.

"Tom... Courtenay." She noticed something flicker in his aquamarine eyes. "I have a small ranch near Brooksville, in Florida."

Surprisingly, after they shared dinner, she managed to sleep a little, stirring only at the pinging of the cabin bell. She was embarrassed to discover that her head had slipped onto Tom Courtenay's broad shoulder. Quickly, she sat up and buckled on her belt.

"Please forgive me," she began, all too aware of the flush that had spread on her cheeks.

His mouth curved into a smile. "I liked it." He turned to look out the window. "We're coming in over the beaches."

As they gazed through the rounded double-glass pane, their plane began to circle over Tampa Bay and she could see the strings of lights that he said were the Gandy and Howard Frankland bridges.

"Beautiful," she said. "They're like necklaces on velvet."

In the tunnel that connected the plane to the gate she felt the warm, moist, incredibly soft rush of tropical air. She rode just ahead of him down the two-story escalator to the baggage-claim area. Almost regretfully she realized that in a moment he'd be saying goodbye.

Absently, she lifted her two bags off the carousel. Beside her, Tom Courtenay was saying something.

She turned and saw that there was anything but goodbye in his light, beautiful eyes. "I'd consider it a favor if you'd keep me company for a steak. That wasn't much of a supper we had."

"I... don't know if I should," she began. "I mean, I should pick up my rental car...."

"We can arrange to have the company drop it off for you in the morning," he said, picking up her heaviest bag.

The matter completely out of her hands, she followed him to the rental car desk, where he effortlessly made the necessary arrangements. Then they were riding up in an elevator to the parking garage.

He fitted his key into the door lock of a cream Mercedes convertible. I wonder how big his "small ranch near Brooksville" is, she thought.

He got in beside her and turned quietly to look at her. His voice took on a husky note. "I've been wanting to do something ever since we sat down together on the plane."

Before she could reply, his mouth, at once rough and tender, had taken complete possession of

hers. In her nostrils, the scent of him was like a powerful aphrodisiac. Desire—frank and sensual and aching—surged through her. Unbidden, her lips communicated it to him and his kiss deepened.

Finally he drew back, his breath on her warm and intimate. For a moment Jenna could not speak. Then, "What must you think of me?" she whispered. "Maybe I shouldn't have come with you," she said, hating her own prim-sounding words. "I hardly know you."

Tom Courtenay gave her a swift, hard glance. "No," he said. "You were right to trust me. I'll only go as far as you let me, Jenna Martin." It wasn't exactly a promise that eased her mind.

AS THE WINE arrived, and then their steaks, she found herself opening up to this masterful stranger, telling him about her parents and Andy. He was a good listener, attentive as he demolished his huge T-bone and lit his pipe afterward.

"Seems to me it's your turn to do the talking," she said.

"We can do that at your place," he said, rising to pull out her chair. She gave him a quick glance. "Your motel has a nice little bar with a dance floor...."

At her motel he stood by while she registered, then tipped a bellhop to take her things upstairs. The bar was small and dark, with a pocket-size area set aside for dancing.

"Shall we?" asked Tom Courtenay, taking her hand.

Going into his arms, she could feel his steady heartbeat through the string-knit sweater. She was conscious of his desire for her. Her lips parted with pleasure at the blunt, passionate way he was nuzzling her neck.

By tacit agreement, they spent most of the next forty-five minutes on the dance floor, lost in the blurring sensations of touch and scent and movement.

Finally he glanced at his watch and led her quietly over to the bar to pay the tab.

"I still have to drive out to Brooksville tonight," he explained, then he was pressing the elevator button and stepping in beside her. She dug in her purse for the room key with lowered eyes.

"I'm afraid this will have to be good night," she whispered. "I'm...not the sort of girl—"

"Not girl," said Tom Courtenay, easing those strong arms about her at her door. "I'd say woman. Why send me away? I really do want you."

Jenna's cheeks burned at his frankness. "Please," she begged softly. "Don't spoil..."

Something flickered in his eyes. "All right," he said, his voice as steady as if they'd been discussing the price of beef cattle. "I remember promising I'd go only as far as you let me. Good night." And with a faint brushing of his mouth against hers, he was gone.

Quickly, she stepped inside and shut the door, tears of frustration

tracing her cheeks. The fact is, I wanted him to stay, she admitted, hugging herself. And now I probably won't see him again.

It was a long time before she fell asleep.

\*

AFTER HER rental car had been delivered the next morning, she left her motel. Following the directions she'd been given, she headed north. Roughly an hour had elapsed by the time she reached a narrow county highway marked Tyrell Road and the Tyrell property.

Huge, venerable oaks hung with swaying Spanish moss bordered the gravel drive. She noted tennis courts and a swimming pool. A covered walkway connected the main house to a multiple-car garage. She pulled up at the steps to the main house's broad veranda. A tall, weathered man in blue jeans and checked shirt stepped down to greet her, as promptly as if he'd been waiting. He nodded. "Mister Ed T. is expecting you," he said.

He drew her into a flagstone foyer and quickly down a central hall to a large, thickly carpeted study that overlooked the rear lawns.

"Miss Jenna Martin," her escort announced, leaving her.

Behind the enormous carved desk sat the man she had come to meet.

At nearly eighty, his skin was mottled, his muscles slack now on the once-powerful frame.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Tyrell," she said, holding out her hand.

He took it and held it warmly.

"How do you do, young lady?" he said in a deep voice, with cadences that were somehow familiar. "Glad you could come. You've probably heard that I knew your daddy."

Her hand still in his, she became aware of another presence in the room. Ed T.'s brown eyes, so bright and yet opaque, had followed her gaze. "I'd like you to meet my son Duke," he said. "Duke, say hello to Jenna Martin."

With a scarcely defined gesture that seemed to hint at reluctance, Duke Tyrell turned to face her, and she found herself staring with astonishment and rapidly mounting fury into Tom Courtenay's aquamarine eyes.

"You!" she exclaimed, finding her voice at last, though she was quivering with anger.

With a faint quirk of one dark brow, Duke Tyrell saluted her. "Thomas Courtenay Tyrell, at your service," he said.

"I take it you've already met my son," said the old man. "What have you been doing to this pretty young lady, Duke, to make her so mad at you?"

"Misrepresenting himself, among other things," she replied in a stony voice when Duke chose not to respond. "We were... seatmates on the plane last night. He introduced himself, but didn't

give his complete name, though he obviously knew who I was."

"As a matter of fact, I *did* know," he said casually, turning to his father. "You see, I'd been up to Chicago to check on her."

Jenna's fury knew no bounds. "Check on me?" she spluttered.

To her surprise, Ed T. chuckled and gave his son a fond look. Then he sought to soothe her ire. "You mustn't mind Duke," he said. "He's stubborn. But I'm still boss around here, and he won't give you a hard time unless I say so."

Again she and Tom Courtenay—Duke Tyrell—were staring at each other with hostility.

"I'll leave you two alone to talk," Duke said shortly. "Since you're going to be staying with us—over my objections, I might add—I'll see you at dinner, Jenna Martin."

And with that challenge flung at her like a gauntlet, he strode out of the room. To think I let him kiss me, she thought, her cheeks burning as she looked after him. To think I actually wanted him.

With a start, she realized the old man was watching her.

"Not telling his right name isn't the worst thing Duke's ever done," he said. "The boy loves me, wants to protect me from my sins. Duke is just like me—so much it scares me sometimes. Except underneath he's got his mother's gentle streak."

"And her eyes?" Jenna was relaxing into her reporter's role as she met and held the old man's

brown gaze. "They're not yours, either."

"No," said Ed T., for a moment a billion miles away. "Those are Mary's, too."

Then he came to himself. He got to his feet with the aid of a cane and ushered her over to the broad, curving chintz sofa.

"We can talk for an hour or so before I have to take my dad-blamed nap. Fire away."

Unobtrusively, Jenna took out her notepad. The hour passed quickly, with Ed T. "storying," as he put it, in response to her questions.

Not having had time to read the contents of Research's folder, she had chosen to begin with his memories of his father, Judge Sanford Tyrell, the patriarch who had founded the family's citrus and cattle empire. And to her way of thinking, the first interview went well.

He had been visibly wearied by their conversation. "Go ring the buzzer for Mrs. Haskins, sweetheart," he instructed her. "She can show you upstairs."

But Mrs. Haskins didn't appear. Instead a blond girl with Ed T.'s dark eyes came into the room. About nineteen years old and deeply tanned, she had a rounded body that was amply displayed by her brief tennis outfit.

"Hi," she said with a smile at Jenna. "Mrs. Haskins is setting the bread to rise. I'll take Miss Martin to her room."

"I'd appreciate it, sugar. Jenna, this pretty little thing is my grand-

daughter Caroline, my grandson Neddy's sister. Their daddy, my son Yancey...died some years ago."

He suddenly looked very old.

Caroline Tyrell linked her arm with Jenna's, as friendly and guileless as a puppy. "C'mon," she said.

In the hall outside, the phone rang shrilly.

Indicating a door at the end of the hall, Caroline picked up the receiver. A moment later, she covered the mouthpiece and waved to Jenna. "It's my friend," she called, unable to hide her pleasure. "I'll only be a few minutes."

At the end of the hall were tall, slim French doors and Jenna stepped beyond them to find herself in a wicker-and-chintz-decorated sun porch surrounded by plants of every description.

"Well, hello, my dear," said an elderly woman's voice.

Aunt Bliss.

"Hello," said Jenna, trying to smooth her countenance. "You must be Mrs. Sanford, Mr. Ed T.'s sister."

"Who else could I be?" The old woman chuckled. "Come 'round here and let me have a look at you. I want to see if women reporters are as scrappy as they say." The overall impression she gave was one of surprising curiosity, sympathy, and liveliness.

Jenna smiled. "I like to think so," she admitted. "But maybe you should ask your nephew."

"Duke?" The old woman raised her brows. "Has he been giving you trouble already?"

Jenna nodded ruefully.

The deep voice at the doorway made Jenna flush with embarrassment. "Let Aunt Bliss be my witness," he was saying in his softly accented voice. "I apologize for my behavior. I'm still opposed to the story, but I've been insufferably rude." Winking at his aunt, he turned with panther grace and left them.

Aunt Bliss gave her dry, throaty chuckle. "That's a Tyrell apology for you," she said. "They always come with a twist of lemon."

Jenna managed to laugh a little, too. "Apparently so," she said. "I just wish someone would take me to my room so I don't have to run into Duke again before dinner."

"Dear me," said the older woman, getting to her feet with surprising agility. "In that case, I'll take you myself."

With relief, Jenna followed Bliss Sanford back to the flagstone entry and up the thickly carpeted stairs.

Her room was a delight, furnished with a delicate, high old mahogany four-poster and matching dresser. "It was my sister-in-law Elizabeth's room," said Aunt Bliss.

"Oh?" Jenna frowned. "I thought her name was Mary."

The other woman shook her head. "No," she said. "That's a long story. I imagine you'll want to shower and change. Things are

kept quiet around here while my brother naps. We dine at seven."

With a brief, welcoming squeeze of Jenna's hand, she moved to depart.

Still puzzling over who Mary was, Jenna slipped gratefully into the shower. Then, drying off, she slipped on her white terry robe and went to sit on the chaise lounge, opening her Tyrell folder. Guiltily, she selected Duke's first.

Son of Mary Courtenay and Ed T. Tyrell. Probably conceived at the Tyrell Ranch, but born in Charlotte, North Carolina. Lived in Asheville until the age of eight, at which time his mother died and he was adopted by his natural father....

Jenna's eyes opened wide in amazement. Duke Tyrell was illegitimate. *No wonder he doesn't want the story written*, Jenna thought.

Soberly she read the rest of the little résumé.

Current steady companion is an old flame who's recently been divorced, Victoria Howard, sister of Peter Howard, one of Duke's law partners.

Jenna felt as though she'd been knifed.

AT TEN TO SEVEN Jenna came downstairs. A low whistle rewarded her from the bottom of the staircase, where a tanned man in

his late twenties, with Ed T.'s brown eyes, was watching her descend.

"Hi," he said with an ingratiating smile. "I'm Neddy, heir to my daddy's title of Tyrell black sheep. If you're an example of what reporters look like, then I demand to be interviewed!"

Taking his hand, she smiled at him uncertainly. Behind him came Duke, holding lightly to his father's elbow. With the two of them were a striking young woman with glittering green eyes and masses of curly dark auburn hair, and a tall, well-built young man with hair of a lighter rusty shade.

Unwillingly, she returned her gaze to Duke. His eyes, narrowed, were raking over her with obvious approval.

"Well, don't you look nice, Jenna, my dear," said Ed T., graciously taking her hand in turn. "These two young rascals are friends of mine—Vicki and Pete Howard. You two, this is Jenna Martin, my biographer."

"How do you do?" Pete Howard offered his hand.

His sister did not. Coolly her green gaze traveled from Jenna to Duke and back again.

Ed T. offered Jenna his arm.

Duke said scarcely two words to her throughout the meal. Meanwhile Ed T. had consumed several glasses of wine, and his tongue had loosened by the time the dessert was brought in.

"Duke came back on the plane last night with Jenna and didn't tell her who he was," the old man said,

relishing the attention he'd attracted. "But I have to admit I'm disappointed in him," he added.

By now Duke's interest was also plain. "Is that so?"

The old man nodded. "If that had been me, at your age," he said, regarding his son, "I'd have done more than *misinform* a pretty young lady like Jenna Martin. I'd have wined and dined her and offered her a little proposition."

"For all you know, I did," Duke replied with equanimity when the laughter had died away. Then he glanced at Jenna. "But Miss Martin is a lady of honor."

He had spoken soberly, almost respectfully, and she saw in him again the Tom Courtenay she had trusted instinctively the night before.

"And Duke Tyrell is a man of his word," she replied with sudden daring, aware the remark would cause some speculation.

Ed T. chuckled softly, seeming satisfied. Now I know what Uncle Gene meant by *wily*, Jenna thought. He wants Duke to cooperate with me and so he attacks me in that charming way of his and relies on Duke's natural chivalry to prod him to my defense.

After supper Ed T. went to his room to lie down. A few moments later Vicki and Pete were making their goodbyes. Jenna stood on the veranda with Duke and Neddy.

"Beautiful night for a walk in the moonlight," said Neddy at Jenna's elbow. "We could start on our interview."

"Sorry," said Duke. "But Jenna and I are going for a ride."

As THEY drove, she asked, "Where are we going?"

"To visit a tree house," he replied cryptically.

At the top of a hill they passed through a quaint, lacy iron gate, and then a big old white wooden house that was the heart of the property came into plain view. Huge old live oaks that must have seen Civil War days dotted the lawns. She could smell newly cut grass, blossoms somewhere. Duke halted the car.

"It's a beautiful place," she said. "So... serene. It has an *expectant air*." She paused. "Is this what you mean by a tree house?"

"No." His eyes didn't leave her face. "I knew I was right to bring you here," he said at last. "C'mon," he said, getting out and coming around to open the door for her. "I'll show you."

He led her toward a break in the thicket of trees that surrounded the old mansion's sweeping lawns. She could see in the bright moonlight that they were on a very high hill indeed. Below, night-darkened ridges and valleys stretched away.

"Holly Hill has the third highest elevation in the state."

He was guiding her up slanting wooden steps that led to a high wooden platform. The view of the valley below, washed in moonlight and splashed with the shadows of clouds, was nothing short of spectacular.

"Oh, Duke..." she breathed.  
"It's wonderful."

They stood, arms about each other, just looking out before them. She felt again the warmth and sense of connection that had pulsed so powerfully between them before.

After some minutes, his fingers tightened on her waist. "I'd really like to kiss you again," he said wryly. "I believe I'll take my chances," he added, lowering his mouth to hers.

She did not protest—in fact she welcomed it. I thought we would be enemies, she said to herself in amazement. But we're like lovers. I want to give him everything I have. Time seemed to stand still as his warm mouth moved against her own.

"Oh, Jenna," he groaned, his deep voice catching with emotion. "The way you can make me want you.... Sweetheart, I don't know what we're going to do." Gently he looked down at her.

"Do about what?" she asked shakily.

"The way I keep wanting you. I'm still opposed to your story. But I want to undress you and take you into the house."

She drew in her breath. "How... could you do that?"

A muscle twitched alongside his mouth. "It's *my* house, Jenna. I've owned it since I was eight years old. It used to belong to my mother."

"Mary Courtenay owned this place?"

"So you know the story. I might have guessed. Ed T. is old. He doesn't know what he's doing, opening this up again." Pain was clear in his voice.

"It must have been a beautiful relationship between the two of them," she said, "here in this lovely place."

"It *was* beautiful. But who will believe it when it's plastered across the pages of your magazine?"

Stung, she recoiled from his words, trying not to show her own hurt. "I don't write stories like that."

He dropped his hands and then touched her waist to guide her down the stairs. "Let's go back to the car."

With a certain restraint, he settled her again in the car and got in beside her.

"You see how awkward this is going to be?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "I see." They took off with a swish of gravel down the narrow drive. Suddenly he gathered her back into the circle of his arm. She could not resist laying her head on his shoulder.

"Jenna," he said simply, with some amazement, and tightened his embrace.

In front of the main house veranda he kissed her again.

ED T. WAS already at the table in the breakfast room when she came down at seven the following morning. His brown eyes twinkled at her.

"You were out so late with that boy of mine," he said.

She felt herself blushing. "I...guess Duke and I buried the hatchet," Jenna told the old man finally. "And not in each other this time."

Hungrily, she dished out eggs and bacon with a liberal hand.

Ed T. nodded. "Did y'all take in a movie?" he asked with flat curiosity.

Jenna lowered her lashes. "No," she said. "Duke took me to see Holly Hill. We climbed into the tree house."

She glanced up to catch the old man's surprise.

"Why...you must be somebody special, sugar," he said in that dry, humorous voice of his. "Duke's never taken any of his girls out there."

Her large hazel eyes widened at his words. *Have I gotten under Duke's skin?* Jenna wondered, staring out the breakfast-room window.

\*

IT WAS JUST Ed T. and Jenna at supper. Duke had not returned from court. Nor was there any sign of Neddy, and Aunt Bliss was spending the next few days at her home in town, where Jenna was invited for brunch the day after tomorrow.

She spent nearly an hour and three-quarters interviewing Ed T. at the table. Finally she called a halt, sensing the old man's weariness. She visited him briefly in his

room as he settled down for his nightly dose of television.

Jenna stepped out onto the terrace, cool now under the stars. Walking down to the pool, she scooped up a handful of the chlorine-scented water, then, on impulse, hurried upstairs to change.

The surface of the huge swimming pool was like hammered silver in the moonlight. Jenna swam about, wanting to stretch her body and relieve its tensions.

Suddenly, strong arms came about her, viselike, and she was being held tightly against a hard, aroused male body and thoroughly, passionately kissed.

His darkly fringed eyes were glinting at her. "Cat got your tongue?"

In reply, she slithered from his grasp, but he caught her, pinning her to the side of the pool. "You know you want me to kiss you again," Duke said, bringing his mouth down on hers. Crushed as she was between him and the smooth tiles, she could feel his every outline, the surging muscles and hard desire. She moaned softly as his kisses spilled over onto her neck and shoulders. "God, but you're lovely," he whispered.

There was a movement on the terrace. Protectively, Duke straightened to shield her.

"It's Neddy," he whispered, glancing over his shoulder. "I caught the glow of his cigarette just then."

By the time they reached shallow water again, they could hear

Neddy's footsteps, retreating into the house.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Duke told her, his hands cradling her. "I wasn't trying to ruin your reputation," he was saying against her ear. "Just going after what I wanted."

She pulled away, climbing out of the pool. "I'm a guest. Your father's hospitality..."

"Ed T. wouldn't mind," he said, following her. "In fact, he'd approve."

She shook her head. "It's not the ethical thing to do."

Jenna could see gooseflesh prickling his skin. God, but he's a beautiful man, she thought. "I hate to broach this now," she said, almost wishing he would clap his hand over her mouth again, "but I have to interview you. Do you have any free time tomorrow?"

Instantly she could feel him recede from her. "I'm...not sure I'm ready to be interviewed," he said with a frown. In the moonlight his eyes seemed to appraise her.

"If you want, you can answer 'no comment' to all my questions."

"All right." His voice betrayed no emotion. "Crest Café, at noon."

THE CREST CAFÉ was situated on Dade City's main street.

A relatively seasoned interviewer for her tender twenty-three years, Jenna experienced a bad case of flutters and had to resort to her prepared list of questions. She recalled the waves of desire that

had broken over her when Duke's handsome mouth had tugged with such delicious insistence at her.

"When you came to the Bar-T," she asked, looking up, "did Ed T. do anything special to make you feel less alien, more a part of the family?"

"No comment." The lines of his strong, tanned features had arranged themselves into a forbidding look.

She hesitated, then backtracked. "You said he seemed powerful to you. Did you think then that you wanted to grow up to be like him?"

Duke gave his napkin and fork a push. "What do you think?" he asked finally. "Am I another Ed T. Tyrell?"

"Your father thinks so," she said. "But he also believes you've got your mother's 'gentle streak.'"

Something perilously akin to anger flashed in Duke's eyes. "I'm going to tell you something right now, Jenna Martin," he said, "and I hope I won't have to repeat it. *Off the record*, you'll have to answer to me unless you keep my mother out of this article."

The waitress brought their barbecue sandwiches on platters heaped with French fries and pickle chips and deposited them in the midst of an emotionally charged silence.

For a moment or two they busied themselves with their food, Duke's anger like a tangible presence between them. Then, the hot barbecue burning her mouth,

Jenna swallowed a deep draft of her tea and tried again.

"Does Ed T. regard you as his heir apparent?"

There was an ominous pause.

"*Off the record,*" he said, "you're not going to get me to say that. Even if it is true. I don't intend to needlessly offend anyone by shooting off my mouth. Or make things any tougher for Neddy than they already are."

When he mentioned Neddy, his deep voice became protective.

Then she realized he had managed to signal for the check without missing a beat of their antagonistic interchange. He was laying some folding money atop it now. Probably including a generous tip.

Jenna felt as if the interview was a total failure.

**THAT AFTERNOON**, Jenna was scheduled to interview Neddy—by the pool, at his request.

The interview went far better than she'd expected. Oh, there was no doubt of Neddy's curiosity about what had happened between herself and Duke the night before, and his jealousy of the vibrant man five years his senior was obvious.

Neddy sipped at his drink. "I guess I told you my father, Yancey Tyrell, was the black sheep of this family. He and my mother, who was the despair of her parents, split up when I was a year old and Ed T. insisted I come to live here. Grandma Elizabeth's nurse took care of me."

Jenna's head was buzzing with questions. "Grandma Elizabeth was Ed T.'s wife, wasn't she? She was still alive when you came to the Bar-T?"

Neddy's brown eyes narrowed. "You're wondering about where Duke's mother fits into the picture, aren't you?" he said.

Stabbed by guilt, as if she were betraying Duke, Jenna nodded.

"Well, I'll tell you. You see, Grandma Elizabeth got her polio and became paralyzed when my daddy was just a baby. She was a sweet lady, but I think it was a relief to her not to have to keep up with Ed T. He was busy in the legislature a lot. But when Joe Courtenay hired on here and brought his pretty wife, something happened.

"The Courtenays didn't have any children, but there was one expected. Right after Mary Courtenay miscarried, old Joe decided to head up to Alaska and work a gold claim. And he didn't want a woman weighing him down."

He paused, sipped again at his drink. "Mary Courtenay stayed on as a cook," he continued. "Now Ed T. and Duke are two of a kind. They see something they want and they go after it. Ed T. wanted Mary and he got her.

"Then, when Duke was on the way, Joe came back. He threatened her that he'd expose Ed T. and ruin his political career if she didn't go away with him. So she went.

"Later, when she died, Ed T. brought Duke back here to live."

He shrugged and gave an ironic smile that tore at her heart. "Duke is his son, and the only child of the woman he loved. My daddy was a disappointment to him. He doesn't let anyone forget that."

Jenna drew in her breath softly. "I wouldn't blame you if you felt some resentment," she said.

He arched one eyebrow at her. "Sure, I resent him. He's everything I'll never be. But I have to admire the bas—"

Stopping, he got to his feet to replenish his empty glass from the portable bar.

"There is that additional problem," he confided. "Y'all have to watch your language when you've got a child born on the wrong side of the blanket in the driver's seat."

DUKE DID NOT put in an appearance that night. The next morning Jenna left early for Tampa to interview Aunt Bliss. The old home was gracious to the point of gentility.

Taking a seat across from her hostess, Jenna said, "You have a lovely home, Aunt Bliss."

"Thank you, dear," replied Ed T.'s sister. "Now tell me, how is your romance going with that boy?"

Jenna reddened. "We're...not exactly having a romance. He got awfully angry yesterday when I asked him about his mother."

"You do have spunk," said Aunt Bliss admiringly.

Briefly, Jenna filled her in on that part of the story Neddy had already told her.

"All true," said Bliss Sanford. "But of course Neddy doesn't realize the extent of my brother's feeling for Mary."

"It was as if Ed wanted to ravage her and protect her at the same time." Aunt Bliss was silent a moment. "Ed T. fell in love with her at once," she said, taking up the thread of the story. "But he tried not to let her know. Then, when Joe Courtenay left for Alaska, he made his move—bought the Holly Hill place for her and took her there."

Jenna was silent.

"I suppose he knew it was wrong," Aunt Bliss continued, "that, in a way, he was hurting both Mary and Elizabeth. But he couldn't divorce an invalid—even if he *weren't* speaker of the Florida House. And he couldn't bear to let Mary go."

The old woman swallowed. "He searched the country for her after she just vanished that terrible day. I think he'd have given up everything he had to get her back. But the only letter he ever got from her was posted by their son after her death."

Jenna realized there were tears in her eyes. "It's heartbreaking," she said. "No wonder Duke doesn't want the story told."

Aunt Bliss nodded and produced a faded image of Mary Courtenay wearing a housedress and voluminous apron and standing beside her husband, Joe.

With Aunt Bliss's permission, Jenna slipped the photograph into a manila envelope to borrow it,

then thanked her hostess and wished her goodbye.

Bliss Sanford's parting comment was, "I'll see you when the whole gang comes down here for my brother's birthday."

\*

SHE EXCUSED herself, declining lunch and stating that she wanted nothing more than a bath, a nap, and the chance to work undisturbed that afternoon in her room. Soon she was settled on the pink chaise lounge by the window.

There was a knock on her door, and Duke stepped inside. He took her in his arms.

"Not here!" she choked under her breath. But his presence was having its familiar effect on her. Unable to stop herself, she glanced at the bed, saw in her mind's eye the two of them lying entwined there.

Outside her door there were footsteps, approaching and then receding. One of the maids. Or Neddy.

"Please," she begged. "Someone is sure to hear us."

"Not if you'll be quiet." He lowered his mouth lazily, as if he had set aside the rest of the day to make love to her. "I have other plans for us than a few stolen moments making love to each other within earshot of my family," he said. "But that's not what I came to tell you. I have to go to Tallahassee for several days on business. But when I get back, I intend to take up exactly where we left off."

"I'm not promiscuous," she told him heatedly.

"That only makes you more delectable, sweetheart," he said, bringing his mouth down on hers to probe it sweetly with his tongue.

One hand squeezed her waist. "At least say you're willing to date me when I get back," he said, his eyes compelling. "I should be back by Friday, and I want to take you to hear the Guarneri Quartet."

She knew of the renowned group of classical string musicians. Plus it gave her an absurd pleasure to think that he would publicly admit his attraction for her.

"I... I'd be delighted, Duke," she said.

"And you won't shy away from being called my girl?"

"No," she conceded, "if that's what I am to be."

"It is." He kissed her again, as if to set a seal on their bargain. "Haven't you known from the beginning?"

Just brushing her lips with his own this time and giving her a little squeeze, he left her.

She had agreed to be "Duke's girl," something she'd vowed not to do. Would she now become one in a long line of women on whom he'd focused his attention, the current *amour* he burned to possess?

DUKE HAD flown to Tallahassee but, to Jenna's annoyance, he returned to the ranch in the Howards' Lincoln with Vicki at his side while Pete Howard lounged in the back seat. Vicki tossed her head

provocatively at Duke, taking possession of his arm when they got out of the car.

Jenna had no choice but to step forward to greet them. Vicki's hostile green gaze flicked insultingly over her.

Something in her soared as Duke shook off Vicki's arm without being too obvious and came over to her to take one of her hands in both his own. He put one arm around her and turned to face his friends.

"I neglected to mention that I'd asked Jenna to attend the Guarneri performance with me this evening," he said in that cool way he had sometimes. "But I wouldn't be averse to making it a foursome, if she doesn't mind."

Mind? she thought furiously. I could kick you, Duke Tyrell, for even suggesting an evening with Vicki Howard.

"Why, of course I don't mind," she replied sweetly, even as she stiffened in his half-embrace.

He tightened his fingers on her waist. "It's settled then," he said, ignoring Vicki's surprise and anger. He nodded at her and her brother. "Y'all come on in and freshen up, have a drink," he said. "We don't have to leave for quite a while yet."

As they went into the house, Jenna felt his breath, warm on her ear.

"No need to get mad, sweetheart," he reassured her in a quiet undertone. "We'll be taking separate cars, and we'll definitely be

ending the evening alone. I promise."

He grinned at her. "Now come on into Ed T.'s study and be gracious while I fix some drinks for my guests."

"I see the twist of lemon doesn't come just with Tyrell apologies," she retorted, suddenly joining into the spirit of his bantering. "It comes with Tyrell promises, too."

It had been the right thing to say. His grin broadened.

DUKE BROUGHT the Mercedes to the door himself that night. "See you at the Tampa Theatre," he told his friends, stowing Jenna inside and taking off down the long drive before the others were even settled inside the Lincoln. He drew her tightly against him, his fingers caressing her through the gauzy silk of her gown.

"You know, don't you," he asked, his deep voice full of emotion, "that I wanted to take you to Holly Hill tonight?"

"Yes," she said, her admission breathless.

"With the damn dinner they're taking us to afterward, it's going to be very late." He paused. "Will you come to my apartment instead?"

"Your...apartment?" She almost stammered it.

"I have a condominium on the bay."

Jenna didn't reply, hiding her face against his velvet dinner jacket, but both of them knew what her answer must be.

The Tampa Theatre, where the Guarneri performed, was like a combination Moorish palace and cave frosted with stalactites. She sat between Duke and Pete Howard, with Vicki on Pete's far side.

Later, after the concert, at a glittering and elegant reception atop the Exchange Bank, she let Duke ply her with champagne. When the dinner party broke up, Vicki insisted on prolonging the evening, cajoling them into going dancing at a small cabaret.

With a smoothness born of practice, Vicki managed to maneuver Duke into being her dance partner. But Duke reclaimed Jenna almost immediately. He held her tightly in his arms, placing soft little kisses on her neck in complete disregard of who might see them. "I'm not going to be able to wait much longer. Say you want me, too."

In reply she stumbled a little against him.

"Too much champagne?" he asked indulgently.

She giggled softly. "I feel so strange and floaty...."

His arms tightened momentarily. "We're getting out of here," he said, "Victoria Howard be damned."

They made their goodbyes abruptly.

From the Exchange it was but a short run in Duke's powerful car to the steel and glass building that housed his apartment. With courtesy and some amusement, he helped her out of the car and guided her into the apartment.

Then with something like a groan, he swept her up into his arms, carried her through a doorway into his bedroom, and switched on a soft lamp. His bed, spread with a silky dark blue quilt, was enormous.

"My precious girl," he said, his gaze moving over her heated skin like a caress. "Do you know how exquisite you are?"

Jenna shook her head slowly. Her senses reeled from the champagne.

"Well, take my word for it, you are," Duke was saying as he smoothed back the quilted dark blue spread and set her down.

Lying back against his pillows and looking up at him, Jenna thought what a truly beautiful man he was. She longed to stretch out her arms and enfold him.

But to her surprise, he went to rummage in the closet, withdrawing a soft old blue work shirt with partially rolled up sleeves. "Here," he said. "You can use this for a nightgown."

"But...Duke..."

In no time he was fitting her hands into the sleeves. "When we finally make love, you're going to be fully aware of what's happening, not anesthetized by alcohol."

\*

AT THE RANCH no one commented on Jenna's getup of ill-fitting clothes she'd borrowed from Duke or the fact that she had stayed overnight in Tampa.

She did get some speculative looks, and Ed T.'s brown eyes sparkled with approval.

Three days before they were to depart for Aunt Bliss's house on Ballast Point, Jenna got what she was sure would be her best photo of Duke and his father. She had entered the study softly. They were talking quietly together: the old man, once tall, leaning on his cane; the big vibrant son, inclining protectively toward his father, gesturing to make a point. She aimed and clicked away three times in rapid succession. The two men she had come to love turned to her.

"Come on in, Jenna sweetheart," said Ed T. with genuine welcome.

"I have a feeling that was a good one," Duke added quietly. "Sit down and I'll fix us all a drink."

They departed for Tampa later in the week. The morning of Ed T.'s birthday, the family joined the old man for breakfast on the terrace and presented their gifts.

From Caroline there was a new silver-headed cane; from Aunt Bliss, a lovely heather-toned sweater she had knitted herself; from Neddy, a case of very expensive Scotch.

Duke's gift was a video machine that could be set to store TV shows his father might otherwise miss. Ed T.'s delight in his new toy was obvious. "This boy of mine knows how much I love gadgets," he exclaimed warmly, oblivious to Neddy's longing for equal praise.

The old man came at last to Jenna's present. When he opened it, tears were bright in his eyes.

"Why, Jenna, you sweet thing," he said in a shaky voice. "You sure know the way to my heart."

Holding the framed photograph for a long moment, he passed it finally to Duke, whose features softened when he viewed the portrait of himself and his father that she had taken in the study.

"Do you have another one of these?" he asked, fixing her with his blue-green gaze.

"I have another print at the ranch. You may have it."

When the group finally scattered to check last-minute details for the party, Jenna remained behind with Ed T. She had decided that the occasion of his eightieth birthday would be their last formal interview.

"What's your greatest joy or pride in accomplishment after eight decades of life?" she asked.

"That's easy, honey," he said promptly. "You caught it in that photograph. Duke is the greatest joy of my life, a son I can be proud of, my claim to immortality. There was only one person who was closer to me than he is." He paused. "You've never asked me about that person."

"I was hoping we could talk about her today."

"You could have anytime. But today *is* right. It won't be like telling a stranger now."

The morning was a cool one, and they sat close together, immersed in their talk and the ter-

race's shifting light and shadow, Jenna in her cashmere wrap over slacks and a sweater and Ed T. with his lap robe.

Steadily, the old man shared the deep, almost painful joy he had known when he'd learned Mary Courtenay was pregnant with Duke, the concern with which he had probed all possible solutions to the situation, looking for a way to marry her and protect his child without dishonoring his dead commitment to Elizabeth.

"While I was still looking for answers, Joe Courtenay came behind my back and took her away. I searched like a wild man. But she had vanished without a trace."

Ed T. said nothing for a moment, his bright brown eyes searching her face. "You're a classy, warmhearted woman, like Duke's mother, and he'd be a fool to let you go. As for me, I couldn't ask for a better daughter."

Shakily, Jenna leaned forward to kiss his cheek. "If I tell you something, will you keep it secret—absolutely to yourself?"

"Word of honor."

"You might as well know—I'm crazy in love with him."

The old man nodded, satisfied.

The party was a huge success. Guests—relatives, politicians, former law partners, business associates—created a din of conversation and laughter as they filled the old mansion.

Jenna exchanged only a few words with Duke all afternoon. He stayed by his father's side, deftly managing the allotment of time

and attention to be given each guest and keeping an eye on things when reporters and cameramen moved in to catch Ed T. cutting his three-tiered, eighty-candle birthday cake.

Not to be outdone, Jenna was in the forefront, snapping twenty or so frames in quick succession. Duke brushed briefly against her as the cake was being served.

"Meet me in the boathouse at four-thirty," he whispered in a low tone.

At about four, Duke led his father off to a downstairs bedroom that the old man used whenever he was staying in town. Duke didn't reappear at the party, and Jenna noted that Vicki glanced several times over her shoulder, obviously seeking his tall form in the crowd. With no compunction, Jenna stole away.

He was waiting for her.

"Duke," she breathed as their arms went around each other.

"I haven't kissed you all day," he reminded her.

His mouth was at once passionate and tender, his tongue's sweet probing a taste of the deeper invasion she craved.

"Definitely up to standard," he said, drawing back. Then he added, "If we go back in together and you stay by me the way I want you to, people are going to get ideas. And that includes just about every member of my family. Will you do it?"

"Of course I will," she said.

The rest of the party passed in a blur, with Jenna only peripherally aware of her rivals' black looks.

AFTER THE PARTY they'd driven quickly to his place and together, almost like man and wife, entered the apartment. A tingle of anticipation reaching to the soles of her feet, she'd walked into the bedroom with him. They'd undressed each other.

Shy and yet unashamedly ravenous, her gaze traveled the magnificent length of him, sliding over the powerful back and shoulder muscles, his narrow waist and hips. It devoured his trim, neatly shaped buttocks, lighter than his body tan but brown enough that she guessed he had lain out in the sun more than once recently without his swimming trunks.

If he doesn't soon take me into his arms, press me into the mattress with the weight of him, I won't be able to stand it.

"Duke?" she whispered at last.

His breath came softly as he turned and lifted her into his arms, settling her on his bed. Their legs were all tangled up together.

"Sweetheart," he said gently. His arms tightened about her. "I especially like the way you feel to me in nothing but your lovely satin skin."

Smoothing the length of her back, he lifted her chin with one finger to nuzzle her mouth, teasing it open with his tongue. His mouth strayed to nip at one ear's tender lobe, then traced a path to her breasts to tug and pull at them

tenderly, as his hands went on touching her under the blanket.

"If I can't have you this time, Duke, I'll die."

She didn't realize she had spoken aloud.

"You'll have me, sweetheart—never fear," he promised thickly. "I want you to feel every quiver of excitement and pleasure I'm capable of arousing in you, every sweet stab of longing."

With finesse that spoke of his experience, he set about arousing her until desire, blazing and yet as mindless and rhythmic as the sea, washed over her in waves.

Out of control, she let passion take charge of her movements. Arching to meet him, she rubbed the sensitized soles of her feet against his calves as she felt him seeking against her. In the next second he had found her, to plunge into her with a deep, full thrust that seemed to reach into her very soul.

"Duke," she cried, her hands digging into his shoulders.

Words became superfluous when his renewed thrusting prompted her to an inborn, rhythmic movement. She was like a well, as deep as the earth, and yet he filled her. Still she needed more from him, more, as she strove against him. They mounted slowly, inexorably to the peak of their communion.

Yet it surprised her when it came. She was flooded with a great warmth of almost unbearable pleasure. Almost as quickly, she broke free, into total abandon-

ment, lost in the cascading spasms of delight that racked her body from head to toe. At the same time, Duke was transformed by his own ecstasy, his powerful body shuddering repeatedly against her. She had never felt so complete.

At last, Duke rolled off her, gently, almost reluctantly, and drew her against him so that her head was resting on his shoulder as she drifted into sleep.

When she woke, Duke's place was empty beside her. Rolling onto her side, she saw that he was sitting in a blue velour chair and talking on the phone. Her man.

"All right," he said to someone as he curled his free hand around a shot glass of some pale golden liquid, probably Scotch. He was frowning deeply.

"Have you called the doctor?" he was asking.

"What's wrong?" she mouthed at him and then stood by with growing uneasiness as he motioned her to keep still.

"All right," he said finally. "Don't worry. I'll be there right away." With a brief goodbye, he replaced the receiver.

"That was Caroline," he said, anticipating her questions. "Ed T.'s complaining of dizziness and chest pain."

"Oh, no." Jenna's frown now matched his own.

They began to dress rapidly. "Your father," she said. "I love him, too."

"I know you do," Duke replied, pulling on his shoes and heading for the door.

They took Ed T. to the hospital. Duke rode with his father in the ambulance, while Jenna followed with Caroline and Neddy in the Mercedes.

"They're taking him up to the cardiac unit," Duke informed them when they found him in Emergency.

Caroline began to sob, and Jenna put both arms around her, holding her until she quieted. Neddy looked ashen faced. Duke went to be with his father.

The passage of time was marked by the waiting-room clock, the bells, the doctors' pages on the hospital intercom, and Duke's hourly reports. The reports were always the same: no change. Ed T. was still in considerable danger.

By morning, Duke's eyes had a haunted look. At first, he tried not to let on what was happening. But then, when Neddy had gone for another pack of cigarettes and Caroline had fallen asleep, he asked Jenna to walk with him down the corridor.

She slipped her arm about his waist, not knowing what to say.

"I guess I can tell you, sweetheart," he said in a voice like no other she'd heard from him. "We're losing him."

"Duke," she said, and then, "Darling, are you sure?"

He nodded. For a moment, he held her tightly, his face buried in her hair. "Jenna," he said, still in that terrible voice. "I'm going to need you."

At four o'clock it was all over. A sudden, massive coronary attack.

"Take Caroline home," Duke instructed Neddy, his aquamarine eyes gone opaque. "Jenna will stay here with me."

Tears were streaming down Neddy's face and he didn't bother to wipe them away. "Why should you be the one?" he said. "Always you. I barely got into the room while he was still alive."

Duke betrayed no emotion. "I'm his next of kin," he said. "I have to sign the papers."

With a little sob, Neddy turned away.

All Jenna could offer was her wordless presence as Duke completed the necessary forms and other business. She waited in the corridor while he went into Ed T.'s room to say goodbye.

It was nearly dusk when they reached Ballast Point. Behind its hedges, the old house was brightly lit. Aunt Bliss will be preparing for another onslaught of relatives, she thought.

ON THE DAY of Ed T.'s funeral it rained. By the time the long line of black limousines and cars was winding up the interstate to Brooksville and Holly Hill, where Ed T. would be buried beside Mary Courtenay, the heavens had opened.

In the shuffle of parking the cars and crossing the lawns in a crowd of people, Jenna slipped away from the Tyrells. Feeling like a traitor but knowing that professionally she must do it, she peered through her Nikon and its distance lens. Duke would be missing

her, she knew, but he'd also be preoccupied. She zoomed in on family and notables, the flower-decked coffin, Duke's face, which had taken on a bruised, daunted look.

When the coffin was being lowered into the earth, she put away her camera and went to stand behind him. He felt her presence. She caught a swift glance from Neddy and realized, *He knows*.

There was no time to say anything. And for the next forty-eight hours they were seldom alone. Duke had immediately assumed control of his father's stock in the family corporation, as Ed T.'s will provided, and he was on the phone a great deal, reassuring business contacts and catching up with a backlog of problems.

The third morning after the funeral, when Jenna came down early to breakfast, she found Duke sitting at the table, reading his morning paper over coffee.

"Sweetheart," he said quietly before she could speak. "I have to get away where I can think. Will you come with me to Holly Hill?"

She nodded. In her heart she knew she couldn't deny him anything.

In the car he drew her tightly against him. To her surprise, he spent most of the hour's drive north speaking of Ed T., never once using the phrase *off the record*. He acted quite as if she'd dropped her project.

But he must know better than that, she thought.

Quietly, he talked to her of his boyhood and Ed T., of how he had come to take his place in the family and won respect, of the plans he and his father had discussed for the future, plans he would now carry out alone. With a certain studied gentleness he inquired about her own estimate of her future—what she planned to do with her writing talent, any goals she might have about assuming a place of control in her own family's business.

A bit embarrassed because her thoughts on the matter were so vague, Jenna confessed she hadn't given it much consideration.

"I guess I didn't look much beyond the next day or the next week," she said. "Like you, I thought my father would always be around."

Later they went up to the house. Duke opened the long windows that led from the bedroom onto the veranda. Suddenly, she felt his eyes on her. Swiftly she turned. His face, she saw, betrayed his desire for her.

Her lips parting softly, she held out her arms. Coming into them, he drew her up tightly against him. Then he was sweeping her up in his arms and carrying her to the bed.

When they were naked, their bodies converged with a sweetness that left her breathless even as something elemental warmed and deepened in her, exerting its power. Clinging to him desperately, she shuddered at the feel of his hard strength. She felt him tremble at the brink of consummation and

then hold back, willing himself to prolong their joy.

"I'm so deep in you," he whispered. "I love you so much."

There was no longer any need for words. Heady with what he had told her and moving against his renewed thrusting with enraptured abandon, she was swept to heights of pleasure that surpassed even those they had shared before.

Carried out of herself, she felt as if her body and mind and spirit had fused, both with the universe and with this man, who was everything to her. A second later, Duke too was out of control, and her pleasure deepened even more as she reveled in the peaking joy that shuddered through his so-loved body.

Gradually, they quieted.

He was still beside her when they heard the front door downstairs open and shut. For a moment they lay motionless.

"'Mister Duke?'" It was Moses Carter's voice.

Duke swore under his breath as the caretaker mounted the first steps with his heavy tread. Jenna drew the top sheet over herself as Duke went to open the bedroom door a little and stood blocking any view of the room with his body.

"There you are," said Carter, with a note of relief. "I let the phone ring and ring but y'all didn't hear it." There was an awkward pause. "'Mister Neddy's done wrapped his car around a tree and he's in the emergency room at Jackson Memorial.'

"Are you sure about this?" Duke spoke the words with tight control.

"Yessir."

Duke bowed his head a little. "Go back downstairs now, please," he said, "and call Miss Caroline. Tell her I'm on my way."

When he turned to face her, there was a look of anguish on his face. "If anything has happened to him, it'll be partly my fault."

"No," said Jenna, getting up and going to him, putting her arms around him. "You had your own grief and you didn't realize...."

But in a way, she knew he was right. They had been thinking only of each other.

"You know, don't you," Duke was saying as he enfolded the still warm, naked length of her, "how much I wanted us to sleep here together tonight, to make love again and again, all night long?" He ran one finger along her cheek and down her neck to just faintly brush the upturned curve of her breast. "With Ed T. gone you wouldn't have any more reason to write the story, so our unfinished business is settled. We can be to each other what we want."

"Oh." Something had gone cold in her at his words. I can't tell him now that I intend to go ahead with the story even though Ed T. is gone, she thought. Not with Neddy in danger. But I'll have to, and soon.

SUPPER that night at the main house was a quiet affair. Afterward, when Caroline murmured

something about retiring early, the house seemed unbearably empty.

God, how I miss him, she thought. With a sigh, she went up to her room to sort through all the notes and old photos and rolls of film she had amassed for Ed T.'s profile. Wrapping the old photos carefully in tissue, she packed everything in a box.

She kicked off her shoes to lie down on top of the bed's seersucker spread and turned out the lamp. She was fast asleep and dreaming when Duke finally returned. She did not hear his soft knock or do more than stir when he pulled a quilt over her.

Jenna woke in the morning quite early. She was alone in the breakfast room with the day's paper. Duke came in from outside five minutes later. At first, she didn't note the set of his jaw, the tight lines around his mouth, didn't see the new and piercing glitter of his aquamarine eyes.

"Hi," she said. "Thank you for putting the quilt over me. At least, I presume you're the one who did."

He nodded.

"How's Neddy?"

"Doing fine. He'll be out of hospital in a day or two." He took a chair. "I have to talk to you, Jenna," he said.

And for the first time, she noticed his deadly serious manner. Suddenly she found herself meeting eyes that were coldly appraising, as if she were a witness for the opposition in a lawsuit. Distrust was written on his every feature.

"Duke, what is it?" she asked.  
"What's wrong?"

"Neddy says you took a lot of photos at the funeral," he said evenly, in what was almost a stranger's voice. "Is that true?"

"Yes."

She felt all sick and cold, her stomach like lead.

"*Why*, Jenna? To make a fool out of me? And plaster my family's grief across the pages of your magazine?"

The words cut her like a lash. "Which accusation shall I answer first?" she retorted, her voice now as cold as his own.

"You might have warned me." He passed a hand over his eyes, as if he hadn't slept. "When Neddy asked if I knew what I was getting into with you, I laughed at him," Duke said. "'Oh,' he said, 'so you don't mind about the pictures she took at the funeral for her magazine.' He might as well have kicked me in the stomach."

"Duke . . ." she began, stretching out a hand to him.

He rebuffed it. "I want to know something, and I want to know it now," he said. "*Are those pictures for publication?*"

"They might be," Jenna said, wishing she could crawl under the table or simply die.

A muscle twitched alongside his mouth and he clenched his fists. "Are you planning to do a sidebar on how it feels to make love to Duke Tyrell?"

Jenna's mouth had come open. "If you love me, how can you say such a thing?"

Duke's voice was hard and cold. "*Loved*," he said. "Definitely in the past. An up-and-coming writer like you wouldn't want to get her tenses mixed up."

For a moment, Duke closed his eyes. When he opened them, all the light had gone out, leaving them hard and cold. They looked like eyes that would never hold love or trust or appreciation again.

"Go," he told her, in a harshly ragged voice. "I hope I never set eyes on you again."

\*

IT WAS raining in Chicago, and her weekend, spent alone in her Lake Shore Drive apartment, was painful beyond belief. On Monday, refusing to tell her uncle much about what was causing her wan look and red-rimmed eyes, she had gone to her corner of the editorial room of the magazine offices.

Her hands on the typewriter keys seemed incongruously tan for the damp, bleak day. Brusquely, she forced herself to concentrate on the business at hand. I won't think of him, she vowed.

With the old photos of the Tyrell family beside her on the desk and proof sheets of the new film she'd shot, she worked there for three lost days, starting early and hunching over her notes far into the evenings, drinking coffee but forgetting to eat, glancing unseeingly at her co-workers as she waited for the next line to come. Somehow, she was finding the words to weave the pattern of affection and truth and irony and

mistakes, of sorrow and joy and fulfillment, that had been Ed T.'s life.

Once the story was complete, the pain came crowding back. Guessing at her unhappiness, her uncle sent her away from Chicago again, to Springfield and the state legislature. When she returned there was a letter from Duke waiting. She tore it open with cold, awkward fingers in her cab on the way to the theater. Her uncle had insisted that she go out.

He had written.

Dear Jenna, your uncle sent me an advance copy of the story. It's beautiful—not at all what I'd feared—and we all love it here. You write about my father as if you'd known him all your life.

Caroline and Aunt Bliss and even Neddy miss you, but I don't think any of them could long for you the way I do. I was hot-tempered and cruel and arrogant, and I know I hurt you badly. But do you think you could forgive me and let me back into your life?

She reread the letter with her heart in her throat. I should go to him, she thought.

Outside Orchestra Hall, snow was falling in big, wet, starry flakes on the black limousine that had pulled up to the curb behind the row of taxis. As she watched, the limousine door opened.

Incredibly, he stepped out, in a heavy overcoat with a dark fur collar, as tall and beautiful as ever, still a man in a million. His dark head was bare to the wind, his hair furring with snowflakes.

"Duke!" she exclaimed.

Like one released from a bad dream, she ran to him, and was lifted off her feet to be enfolded in his arms.

"Ah, sweetheart," he said, his breath smoking in the cold.

Eagerly she returned his caresses, kissing his cheek, which was delicious with scented after-shave and ruddy with cold. "What are you doing here?" she asked finally as he drew back to look at her. "How did you find me?"

His aquamarine eyes narrowed and he regarded her from beneath straight, dark lashes. "I came looking for you. Your Uncle Gene told me where. I love you more than life and I want to marry you. But first of all, I want to take you back to Holly Hill tonight."

His words, spoken in that deep, soft, accented voice she had heard even in her dreams, caught her by surprise. This can't be real, she thought.

"That was a beautiful story you wrote," he said, taking her chilly hands in his. "It made me cry, something I hadn't done."

She smiled at him. "You wouldn't have to marry me, you know." A wave of shyness swept over her. "You've been a confirmed bachelor for years, the despair of the best-looking women

you know," she whispered. "Why me?"

His eyes gleamed at her left-handed compliment. "Don't you know, sweetheart? Don't you realize that you're that rare and mystical combination, someone I want to ravish and protect?"

Unshed tears glittered in her eyes as she recalled what Aunt Bliss had said about Ed T. and Mary Courtenay. Oh, she thought, I must be the luckiest girl in the world.

"Well?" His mouth was so tender-looking she longed to raise her own to it. "Don't keep me dangling. Are you going to marry me and come back to Florida with me tonight?"

Of course, it would have all been arranged already. He would be her lover and husband, and—from now on—the task of falling in with such high-handed last-minute maneuvers would be part of her life.

"Yes to anything you want, my darling Duke Tyrell. Yes, I'll marry you."

He kissed her then, creating a slight hush around them as pas-

sersby paused to look at them, forgetting the cold and snow for a moment.

AT LAST, they were turning up the long, narrow drive at Holly Hill. Parking the car in front of the veranda, he helped her out, carried her inside and up the stairs to the door of Mary Courtenay's room. He pushed it open with his foot, to reveal the high old four-poster they'd traveled so far to reach.

Sighing, he bent his head. His mouth covered hers, hinting already at the passion she knew would flare between them.

"From this moment on, I consider you my wife, Jenna Martin Tyrell," he said in that fierce way he had when he was feeling something very keenly.

Then, with great tenderness and the leisure of a man who finally has the woman he wants, he put her down on the bed in the moonlight and began slowly to unfasten her clothes.





# **ROBIN FRANCIS**

## **Season of Dreams**



This's love of plants had called her home to take over her grandmother's nurseries. But Luc's return mystified her—until she learned that he had come back for her!

The ballroom of the Warwick Inn had been closed for more than two years. To Thia Sommers it smelled of faded flowers and secret dreams.

Shortly after the inn's closing the Jackson County Historical Society had rescued the elegant period pieces in the ballroom from the auction block. Crystal chandeliers still blossomed from the ceiling like so many giant inverted mushrooms.

Assailed by memories—some bitter, some sweet, all of them poignant—Thia stood in the dusky patch of sunlight near the French doors, waiting for her sister, Celia, to find the circuit breaker. Outside on the terrace the balmy warmth of an early June evening tempted Thia to abandon the nostalgia of the ballroom for the relative safety of the grounds, but she made herself resist the temptation.

Eleven years ago the room had been alive with music and laughter, brightened by the youthful pastels of ball gowns. Careful not to stray in the shadows that ringed her pool of light, Thia walked ten steps this way, five the other. The lonely sound of her own footsteps accompanied her restless pacing.

Why was Celia taking so long? Thia wondered.

Even as this thought surfaced, the wall sconces flickered on. She

was not a shy, uncertain high school girl any longer.

"Everything's under control."

Celia's disembodied voice came from the darkness behind the bandstand, and a moment later her sister walked through the curtains onto the dais.

"Well?" she inquired expectantly. "What do you think?"

Why had she let Celia con her into doing the flowers for the Founders' Day Dance. If the circumstances had been different, Thia would not have hesitated to voice her misgivings. But for the first time since her divorce from Ross Killbourne, Celia was behaving like her charming, vivacious self.

"It's certainly—huge," Thia replied noncommittally, but Celia didn't notice her lack of enthusiasm. She began dancing around the room, gliding and twirling to an imaginary waltz.

"Oh, Thia, doesn't this bring back memories? Remember my Senior Prom?"

Thia nodded pensively. As a former homecoming queen, cheerleader, student council officer, and all-round most popular girl on campus, Celia had every reason to smile radiantly. Thia, on the other hand, had found it hard to bloom in the shadow of her glamorous older sister.

"Several well-known former residents are coming for Founders' Day," Celia said.

"For instance?"

"Austin Cooke."

"The actor?"

"None other."

"I didn't know he was a native of Stratford."

"Technically he isn't, but he got his start at the Stratford Shakespearean Festival. And you'll be happy to hear that Mickie Lloyd has agreed to perform at the dance."

"Has she?" Thinking of the unassuming girl who had been her best friend from kindergarten through the sixth grade made Thia smile. Mickie Lloyd's heart-tugging way with a ballad had brought her to stardom.

"The Dance Committee has an extremely tight budget, so I'm hoping to persuade Mickie to contribute her services."

"I suppose that means you'll ask me to contribute the nursery's services as well."

"Think of the publicity you'll get out of it, Thia. The challenge will be good for you," Celia replied bracingly. "You've been a hermit for too long."

It had been nearly a year since Thia had opted to give up her job with a Portland public relations firm so that she could return to Stratford and take over the management of her grandmother's nursery and florist shop. As Celia so colorfully put it, she'd spent most of the time "vegetating" with her plants.

Celia leaped to her feet. "I want this dance to be special, Thia. If I have my way, it's going to be the highlight of Founders' Day. I want it to be truly memorable, an occasion all of Stratford, Oregon, can be proud of."

Thia placed a calming hand on Celia's shoulder.

"But isn't renting the Warwick ballroom a bit ambitious?"

"Not at all," Celia replied. "The inn's new owner has been very generous. He's offered to donate the use of the ballroom."

"New owner?" Thia repeated blankly. "Does that mean someone has finally bought this white elephant?"

"Go to the head of the class, Thia Sommers."

A rumble baritone voice answered her question, and Thia's pulses raced erratically when she saw the man who had made the response. The conservative banker's-gray business suit he wore emphasized his spare, angular build, yet he gave the impression of strength as he stood just inside the French doors, studying her.

Celia poked an elbow in her ribs and whispered slyly. "Speaking of people changing for the better."

A single strand of coarse, dark hair had fallen across his broad forehead, and there was something about his stance, some hint of tightly leashed power, that struck a responsive chord deep inside her. He moved away from the doors. She knew only one man who moved with that springy prizefighter's gait.

"Luc," she murmured. "Luc Domini."

A hot rush of color flooded her cheeks because she'd sounded giddy and breathless. "You're the new owner of the inn?"

Even as a teenager, Lucian Domini had been fiercely proud, intensely ambitious, and oddly mature. At almost nineteen, he'd been the oldest of the seniors at Stratford High School, while she had been among the youngest sophomores. They'd had one thing in common. Basically, both of them were outsiders.

Thia had been a loner because the other students had mistaken her paralyzing shyness for aloofness, but Luc had been one through choice. In those days he'd never had the money to buy tickets to movies and dances. He couldn't even afford Coke dates or club dues, and his pride would not permit his letting others pay his way.

Luc was a cynic and she a romantic. No one understood their alliance. At the time even Thia wasn't sure what Luc saw in her. She was aware that the other girls in her class were envious, but she hadn't realized that her sister was jealous of Luc's interest in her until Celia informed their mother that Thia was seeing him.

Predictably enough, Denise Sommers was horrified. She was stunned by Thia's defiance. It was only after endless arguments that they'd reached a compromise, and Thia had agreed not to meet Luc outside of school.

She complained about the curfew her mother had imposed, and Luc told her, "So what if your mother's overprotective? Being a lady is as natural to you as breathing, for Chrissake, and you should thank her for teaching you the social graces, 'cause I can tell you one thing, they're hard as hell to learn if you're not born with 'em."

Judging by the impeccable cut of his suit, Luc had acquired the urbane polish he'd always admired, yet Thia sensed that his urbanity concealed a hard core of ruthlessness....

Her sister was smiling into Luc's eyes. "I can't tell you how much this will mean to the Dance Committee, Luc."

"Don't mention it," he replied.

"Oh, but I must. I realize it's short notice, but we're meeting tomorrow night and I'm having a little get-together afterward. I insist that you join us."

Luc's grin warmed the cool, dark depths of his eyes. "Very well, Celia, if you insist."

"Marvelous! Then I'll expect you about eight-thirty."

Luc nodded. "Do you still live on Madrone Lane?"

"Since my divorce." For a moment, Celia looked touchingly forlorn.

Thia bit her lip to keep from breaking into a grin. She cleared her throat to get Luc's and Celia's attention.

"If the two of you will excuse me," she said, "I'll be leaving now."

She started toward the French doors, but Luc caught hold of her arm. "Will I see you tomorrow evening?"

"No. I'm not on the committee. And I don't live at home anymore," Thia finished.

Although she stared pointedly at Luc's hand on her arm, he didn't let her go until Celia added, "Naturally, Thia, if you'd like to join us, you'd be more than welcome."

"We can go together, Thia," Luc said smoothly. "I'll stop by for you about eight."

How could she argue with him when he favored her with one of his rare, disarming smiles?

"Eight will be fine," she agreed, and Celia went slack-jawed with disbelief.

"What's your address?" asked Luc.

"It's in the phone book, under Sommers Nursery."

She forced herself to walk sedately until she had left the terrace. Then her pace quickened until, at last, she gave up the pretense of composure and sprinted the final thirty yards or so to her van.

DENISE SOMMERS flung the door wide open and moved aside to allow Luc and Thia entrance.

Thia spoke evenly. "You remember Luc Domini, don't you, Mother?"

"Who?" Denise turned around and studied Luc, finally peering at him. At last she informed him, "I'm happy to see that you've improved with age, young man."

Because his own mother had died when he was very young, in the old days he'd never understood why Thia should complain about the way her mother tried to organize her life, but now he did. Denise's overbearing attitude explained a lot.

Thia was relieved when she and Luc left the party later that night and were almost back at the nursery.

"What kind of work did you do before you came home?" he asked her.

"I was in public relations."

He raised a quizzical eyebrow at her.

"You're surprised by that, aren't you?" said Thia.

"I'll admit it's not a field I'd expect you to choose. You seem so—reserved." Luc braked to make the turn into the drive. "Why did you resign?"

"I was assigned to whitewash a politician who'd gotten caught with his hand in the public till. He'd taken bribes and rigged elections, he was guilty of conflict of interest—the whole bit."

"Then it became a matter of ethics."

"That's it exactly, Luc."

She had forgotten to leave the porch light on, and the front windows were dark, but even the darkness couldn't disguise the fact that the gray-shingled bungalow needed a coat of paint. Despite its air of genteel shabbiness, however, it looked cozy and welcoming.

"This is another reason I resigned." Her gaze fixed on the house.

"I've always looked forward to the time when I could make my home in Stratford, too."

There was a moment of silence while Thia searched for her latchkey. As they moved to the house and she unlocked the door, she said, "Are you planning on staying here permanently?"

"I'd like to," Luc answered. "If things work out as I hope they will, I'll certainly stay on."

He followed Thia into the parlor.

His gaze traveled over her features when the lights came on, finally settling on her mouth. When she would have looked away from him, his fingers curved around the nape of her neck.

A perplexed frown ruffled the smoothness of her brow and she said, "What else do you want, Luc? Why have you come back to Stratford?"

Luc inhaled deeply and squared his shoulders. "*You're* the reason. I've come back for you."

"For me?" she said faintly.

"That's right." Without inflection, as dispassionately as if he were talking about the weather, Luc added, "You see, Thia, I intend to marry you."

\*

AFTER LUC'S flat pronouncement it seemed anticlimactic to sit with him in the kitchen, drinking the coffee she'd made, but that was what Thia did. Although they

talked, afterward she had no recollection of what they had discussed.

The following morning she made her delivery of cut flowers to the florist shop later than she usually did. It took her much longer than it should have to complete the task, because thoughts of Luc kept intruding.

Did he see her as a lover? she wondered. Maybe he had decided a wife would be an asset to his business. The Sommers name was synonymous with a certain social prominence in Stratford.

And if she discovered that Luc didn't love her, would it make a significant difference? Part of her was afraid that it wouldn't. But another part—perhaps the major part—was even more afraid that it would.

The morning had gotten off to a frustrating start, and things did not improve as the day progressed. She had just finished adjusting the sprinklers when Celia came along the path through the greenery. Her eyes were red rimmed from weeping.

"You've had another run-in with Mother."

"Mother and I have been at each other's throats ever since Ross and I separated. She's always taken his side against me." Outraged tears welled in her eyes.

"I'll admit she's always been a fussbudget, Celia, but if the chips were down, she'd back you against anyone—including Ross Killbourne."

"You've been out in the sun too long," Celia replied somberly. "Ever since Daddy ran off with that secretary of his, she's been so damned concerned about what people will think of her and her 'darling little girls' that she'll stoop to just about anything to preserve our image."

Thia removed her gardening gloves slowly, stalling. Finally she ventured, "You know Mother's anxious to see you resolve your differences with Ross—"

"She should have thought of that before she drove him off," Celia interjected hotly.

Celia's eyes shied away from Thia's hazel gaze. "I've decided to look for a place of my own."

"Have you?" Thia exclaimed delightedly.

Celia nodded. "I'd like to move in with you, Thia—just temporarily, mind you. I'd only stay here until I get on my feet financially. Naturally I'll have to find a job."

That, thought Thia, was easier said than done. Celia had never been gainfully employed. And even in the best of times jobs were scarce in Stratford, Oregon.

Thia barely made ends meet herself.

"You realize how small the house is?" she inquired cautiously.

"I know you don't have much room," Celia answered, "but I promise you'll hardly even know I'm around."

Thia sighed as Celia hastily arranged to move into Thia's spare bedroom the next weekend.

Before Celia left, she inquired casually, "By the way, how did you and Luc hit it off last night?"

Opting for nonchalance, Thia offered a half-truth. "We got along fine. We're having dinner together tonight."

Celia's eyebrows shot up. "Are you?" She climbed into her car and started the engine, but before she drove away, she got in one last dismaying comment. "Thia," she said absently, "don't you think it's funny that Luc should ask you out when it's me he always had a crush on?"

Thia had no answer for that one.

SOME OF THE questions were running through Thia's mind that evening, though Thia looked poised and confident when she opened the door to Luc.

They talked easily during the drive to Pete's Hideaway. The restaurant was elegant and intimate. During dinner, Luc's deep-set eyes reflected the warmth of the candle flame.

She met his gaze without wavering as she ate the last of her dessert. She paused to take a sip of water before telling Luc about her sister's decision to move out of Denise's house. She ended by saying, "Look, there's no tactful way to say this—"

"Whatever it is, Thia, out with it."

She inhaled deeply. "When we were in high school, didn't you have a crush on my sister?"

"Wow! That's a long time ago. Of course, most of the guys were

wild about Celia, and I always thought she was pretty." Frowning thoughtfully, Luc added, "But it never entered my mind that you might think you're not my first choice."

With his forefinger, Luc outlined her mouth. "Not only are you my first choice, Thia, you're my only choice."

Luc had left a hot, tingling sensation where he'd touched her. She wanted to believe him.

For long moments he only stared at her. Then he got to his feet with a curious abruptness and signaled to the waiter for the check.

"Come with me, Thia," he said, holding out his hand to her. "There's something I want to show you."

THIA HAD LIVED in Jackson County most of her life, but she was familiar with Ramsey Slough only by reputation. Whatever lawlessness occurred in the area was likely to happen in "the Slough." Despite the seasonable warmth of the June evening, Thia shivered.

Luc retrieved a flashlight from the glove compartment. "Watch your step," he cautioned as he handed her out of the car. The shack Luc led her toward appeared to be even more dilapidated than the rest. Thia clung to his arm as he opened the front door.

"Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks, Miss Sommers."

"Is this where you used to live?" Thia inquired.

Luc nodded. The small front room was littered with rubbish. The walls were papered with newspapers, and cobwebs hung like dirty laundry from the rafters.

"I bought this place a few years ago to remind me of my humble origins." His tone was so harsh. "This place was a step up for my Dad and me. Since most of our wages went for cheap booze, we were accustomed to much less—"

He turned away from her. "Here they are," he muttered.

"What, Luc?"

"Come see for yourself."

He draped an arm around her shoulders and directed her attention to the clippings he'd found on the wall.

The first one included a picture that had been taken during a recital her ballet class had given when she was twelve. A subdued groan escaped her as her gaze fell upon the second newspaper photograph. It showed her on the tennis court at thirteen, squinting into the camera after the junior doubles tournament at the country club. The third picture was a snapshot that had been taken on the occasion of her fifteenth birthday, just as she was preparing to blow out the candles on the cake.

She glanced questioningly at Luc.

"The article about the recital was in the paper the day my Dad and I arrived in Stratford." He indicated the spot where they were standing. "My bed used to be here, and for years the pictures of you were the first thing I saw in the

morning and the last thing I saw at night. You're my first and only choice—”

She was lost in thought while Luc drove her home. It seemed possible that, in his drive to success, she was the carrot, the symbol of the respectability he hoped to attain, while the shack was the stick that goaded him onward.

For all her uncertainties, when they had arrived at her front door and Luc took her in his arms, she didn't try to avoid his kiss. Her arms slipped inside his jacket and wound about his waist to draw him closer while his hands caressed her shoulders and wandered over her back, molding her softness to him. He parted her lips, and she abandoned herself to sensation.

Somehow Thia had always known that Luc's kiss would be like this. Seeking and yielding, demanding and giving, at the same time velvety soft and rough with desire. She realized that some hidden part of herself had always known that his body would be hard and urgent, that she would melt beneath the searing heat of his ardor, that his embrace would leave her shaken and devastated.

The pounding rush of blood through her ears drowned out the sound of his voice.

“What?” she murmured. “Did you say something?”

He covered the sensitive skin at the side of her neck with kisses and she shivered uncontrollably.

“I asked if you're free tomorrow night.”

“No, I'm not,” she answered breathlessly. “You've forgotten Celia's moving in.”

“Sunday then,” Luc said firmly. Unsure of her voice, Thia nodded.

SATURDAY ARRIVED, and with it, Celia. Thia wandered among the movers' cartons that threatened to crowd her out of the living room and prayed for divine intervention.

“Let Celia find a job soon,” she silently petitioned. “But if she doesn't, please, Lord, give me patience.”

That evening Denise paid them a visit. She said she'd come by to deliver a few items Celia had overlooked, and she also brought Thia several magazines. Denise had marked one article documenting the rising fortunes of four alumnae of the Wharton School of Business, which Thia had attended.

The next day, while she and Luc picnicked on the shore of Emigrant Lake, she told him about the article. Thia sighed heavily. “Lately, whatever I do, I know I'm going to disappoint someone—maybe myself most of all. But what really bothers me is that I can't enjoy the good things that happen because I'm waiting for something equally bad to offset them.”

“Welcome to the club, honey.” Luc tossed her an apple. “Anyway, sometimes you learn more from your failures than you do from your successes.”

"That sounds like my grandmother's philosophy."

"It should. She's the one who taught it to me."

"I hadn't realized you know her."

"Sure I do," Luc affirmed. "When my dad took off, your grandmother gave me odd jobs around the nursery. We still keep in touch. She's the one who told me you'd come home."

Startled by this disclosure, Thia studied Luc covertly as he eased into a half-reclining position on the blanket.

"She cosigned a loan for me, too."

Thia nodded thoughtfully. Her grandmother had cosigned a number of notes, and not all the debtors had paid off their loans. Obviously Luc was very grateful to her grandmother. Was that why—

Luc tumbled her onto the blanket beside him. "You're wrong, you know," he said gruffly. "I didn't propose to you out of gratitude to Elvira."

"You didn't propose to me at all," Thia returned stiffly. "You only said you'd come back to Stratford to marry me."

A roguish grin lifted the corners of Luc's mouth and glinted in his eyes. "Will you do me the honor of marrying me, Thia Sommers?"

His self-confidence was maddening. "I'll think about it," she snapped, but Luc was undaunted by the chill in her voice. His hands roamed over her, and when her body went slack and yielding in his

arms, he whispered, "While you're at it, think about this, too."

Before she could object to his arrogance, he captured her lips in a playful, biting kiss that suddenly became hard and possessive. It was frightening to want him so badly when she had so many questions about his motives.

\*

THE FOUNDERS' Day Dance Committee was scheduled to meet the last Wednesday in June. As Celia prepared to leave the house that evening, she said, "I'd like to give the others a progress report about the arrangements you're making for the flowers."

"Oh." Thia felt herself starting to blush. "I meant to get to the plans this week, but I haven't had the time. We've been looking for an apartment for Luc, but now he's considering the Kirby estate—"

"Is he?" Celia broke in eagerly. "I adore that old place. Will Luc be redecorating? I've been thinking of setting up shop as an interior designer."

This latest scheme of her sister's was new to Thia, but it came as no surprise. Celia hadn't found a job yet.

Thia laughed, and Celia joined in.

As Celia collected her notebook, Thia promised, "I'll try to have some plans worked out before your next meeting."

As Celia headed for the door, she gave Thia a meaningful smile. "With the way Luc's been mo-

nopolizing your time, I guess it will have to do. Which reminds me, where is he tonight?"

"He had to make a trip to Portland. A meeting with his board of directors."

Luc had always been determined, but now, at times, he seemed driven. Only last night they'd toured the lovely old Kirby house, and while she had rhapsodized over the elegant rooms, he'd said only that the location would do for entertaining clients.

If she had cared for him less, or if he'd cared for her more, his ruthlessness would have been easier to accept.

Finally, at eleven-thirty, she turned off the lights and went to her room, disheartened because Luc hadn't called.

Luc still hadn't called by Friday evening. Thia spent the weekend barricaded in her office, working out a plan for turning the Warwick Inn ballroom into a Victorian garden, complete with fountains, a wishing well, and a vine-covered arbor.

On Monday Thia received a note from her old school friend Mickie Lloyd. "I'm looking forward to a hot time in the old town on Founders' Day, kiddo. Can't wait to see you."

There was still no call from Luc.

THE HEAT from the greenhouse struck Luc as forcibly as a blow. He was unbuttoning his shirt cuffs when he heard a strident oath from somewhere above his head. He glanced upward and saw Thia,

barely visible in the lush growth of bougainvillea, which had been trained along one corner of the glass roof to provide shade for the sun-sensitive plants. She was clinging precariously to the woody brown trunk of a vine while her dangling feet scrabbled to find a toehold on the top rung of a teetering ladder.

A sharp, cracking sound came from the crown of the vine just then, and the trunk dipped ominously.

Thia clutched at the trunk and squawked with terror. He dropped his coat and rushed to help.

When he righted the ladder, Thia's toes made contact with the top rung and found a safe purchase. She was fumbling with the latch on one of the manual vents in the ceiling. She swore and gave it another push, and this time it slid back. "Finally!" she muttered. "I'm about to suffocate."

She looked it, thought Luc, taking in her flushed, dust-streaked face and tangled blond hair. She wore only shorts and a halter top, and they hadn't kept the bougainvillea branches from tearing at her skin. Her arms and shoulders were covered with angry-looking welts and livid scratches.

He held his hands out to her as she climbed down, silently offering to help her, but she ignored his offer.

As she touched the ground, she stepped away from Luc, putting a distance of several yards between them. Then she demanded, "Why didn't you call?"

"You said you needed time to think," Luc answered laconically.

"If I'd craved chocolates, would you have given me a candy store?"

Luc's expression hardened. "If I thought that a candy store was what you really wanted, yes, I damned well might!"

Thia stared at him. *How do I answer that?* she wondered.

Luc draped his arm about her shoulders.

"Truce?" he said gruffly.

Thia nodded and leaned against him.

"Come on," he growled. "Let's go up to the house and take care of those scratches."

Luc applied antiseptic to the scratches on her back. His touch was soothing, yet oddly exhilarating.

"Mmm," she murmured, swaying to his touch. As he massaged the tight knots of tension at the nape of her neck, a peculiar lethargy stole over her. Thia's eyelids drifted shut.

She was conscious that only the lightweight fabric of Luc's trousers separated his thighs from her naked back. The air in the room was permeated with the musky odor of desire. It shimmered with passion.

She realized that Luc had pulled her to her feet and was embracing her from behind. Her pulses leaped wildly.

The towel covering her had whispered down the length of her body to the floor, and Luc's gaze wandered freely over her.

"Beautiful," he crooned. His hands moved to cup the fullness of her breasts.

Now his lips found hers with an impatience that matched her own. She could only abandon herself to the riotous, glorious, primitive need he created within her.

With shaking hands she worked at his shirt buttons, eager for the feel of him. While she fumbled with his belt, with the zipper and snap on his trousers, baring his body for her pleasure, his hands played over her body in a series of bold, fiery caresses. Even as he peeled off the last of his clothing, she drew him beside her. Their limbs entwined. He kissed her everywhere, touched her everywhere. He sighed as he entered her. In a voice rough with passion he whispered endearments, and his control delighted and tormented her.

Her body writhed feverishly. She wrapped her legs around his waist and arched her hips to his.

"Please," she gasped. "Please, Luc, I want more...."

With a hoarse cry of triumph, with intoxicating kisses and wild caresses, he gave her delights she'd never dreamed existed. He gave her everything she'd ever wanted.

\*

FOR A LONG time they lay in each other's arms, their bodies nestled together, heads on the same pillow. She felt a closeness that was more than merely physical, and she knew that in the act of giving him

her body, she had also given her vows. Her fate was sealed.

CELIA ARRIVED home. Luc was with Thia, sitting on a stool behind the breakfast bar, shirtless but totally at ease. Celia studied them, tilting her head to one side. "What on earth have the two of you been up to?"

Thia didn't know whether to throttle her or run out of the room to hide her embarrassment.

"Oh, my God!" Celia cried as comprehension dawned. "If I'm interrupting anything, just say the word and I'll leave."

"No, Celia. Stay." Luc slipped his arm about Thia's waist. "Your timing couldn't be better. In fact, it's perfect. Thia and I would welcome your opinion."

"My opinion?" Celia echoed.

"About what?" Thia asked sharply. *Please, Luc*, she silently pleaded. *Don't tell Celia just yet.*

His grin slowly broadened, and he said, "I'd like Celia's advice about our wedding, of course. What else?"

"Wedding!" Celia stared at Thia with open astonishment. "Does that mean you and Luc are getting married?"

"That's right," Luc answered. "I hope you approve."

"Oh, I do," Celia said. "Have you set the date?"

"Not yet," Thia replied grudgingly. Until twenty minutes ago they had been too busy making love to concern themselves with anything practical. Thia found that she resented Luc's sudden shift

from the romantic to the matter-of-fact.

She listened with a growing sense of unreality as he and Celia discussed churches and music and flowers and caterers, and argued about dates.

Finally Celia uncapped a Day-Glo marker, drew a bright-red circle around Saturday, October thirteenth, and laughingly inquired, "You're not superstitious, are you?"

"No." Luc grinned and shook his head.

"Well, I am," Thia asserted. "The fall just happens to be one of the busiest times of year at the nursery, so you'll have to honeymoon without me."

She glanced at Luc, and slowly her annoyed scowl warmed to a tentative smile. She leaned over to give him a quick kiss on the ear, only to have him brush her aside. This reaction was not at all what she would have expected from the man who was capable of marathon kissing sessions in the bedroom.

"Any objections to the end of November?" she asked Luc softly.

"Only one," he replied. "I'm a patient man, Thia mia, but I'm not that patient."

"But you will wait."

Somehow, Thia felt certain of that, even before Luc nodded gravely and said, "If I have to."

\*  
THE FOLLOWING week Thia and Luc saw each other only in snatches. His schedule was filled with laying the groundwork for the remodeling at the inn. She had her own problems to contend with.

She was doing double duty at the nursery. Her floral designer left without giving any notice.

After one especially trying day, Thia told Celia, "If I don't find another designer soon, I'll go crazy."

"How about giving me a crack at it?"

Taken aback by her sister's proposal, Thia stared at Celia.

"I'm good with people," Celia went on crisply, as if Thia had argued the point, "and I have an eye for color and proportion."

Thia sighed. "We're not talking about some high-powered career here. The hours aren't the greatest, and the pay's lousy—"

"I'm not saying I'll stay forever, but I'd be as permanent as anyone you could hire off the street."

Although she remained unconvinced that the arrangement would work out, Thia agreed to give her sister a trial.

ON THE SUNDAY before the Founders' Day Dance, Luc and Thia had dinner with Denise.

"How's Celia working out as your floral designer?" Denise asked.

"She's a natural," Thia replied enthusiastically. "She has a flair for design, and since she has to get up with the sun, she's taken to going to bed with it too."

Denise shook her head with wonderment. "That doesn't sound like Celia, but I find it encouraging."

Thia puzzled over her mother's remark. Had Denise deliberately goaded Celia into striking out on her own?

Luc commented that he'd heard Denise was president of the Historical Society.

"Someone told me that you're responsible for saving the inn," said Luc.

This led to the discovery that they had a common interest in preserving the pioneer heritage of Stratford and that they got along amazingly well; so well that Thia couldn't help thinking that her engagement ring might have prompted her mother's atypical amiability.

Luc had given her the ring only the night before. The blue-white, emerald-cut diamond was large enough to impress. Thia felt self-conscious about wearing it. She wondered whether it symbolized Luc's affection for her or his own success.

Although she was happy that Luc had won her mother's approval, and she was pleased that Denise seemed interested in establishing an easy rapport with her future son-in-law, Thia was appalled to find herself searching for

signs of hypocrisy on both their parts.

*What's in it for them?* the skeptic in her wanted to know.

Denise was standing beside Thia's chair. Thia's musings ground to a sudden halt.

"Did you say something to me?"

"I did, but you were worlds away." Denise clucked her tongue. "I asked if you'd care to come to the powder room with me."

Thia rose and followed her mother. In the powder room Denise seated herself in front of the mirror.

"Is something wrong?"

"No," Thia replied without conviction. "Except—well, I'm anxious for you and Luc to get along. Your approval means a great deal to me."

"Well, for whatever it's worth, you have it." Denise fluffed the hair at the back of her head. "In case you haven't notice, though, I'm not a terrific judge of men."

Thia sank down onto the bench beside her mother. "If you're thinking of Daddy—"

"It's not just your father, darling. Take Luc, for instance. I thought he'd never be anything but a ruffian, and now look at him!"

Denise stared at her daughter. "I can't believe you're interested in my opinion of Luc. You've always been so self-sufficient."

"It's mostly a front, Mother."

"Too much independence can be awfully lonely," said Denise. She covered Thia's hand with her own. "I wish I'd known this before,

dear. I might have been able to help you."

"Then help me now, Mother. I love Luc so much, it scares me."

Denise nodded knowingly. "He can hurt you simply by not returning your love—"

"That's it, Mother! That's what I'm afraid of."

"Well, you needn't be. I'm convinced Luc loves you. I think," Denise went on hesitantly, "that he's as reluctant to admit he's in love as you are, Cynthia." After a momentary pause, Denise went on more strongly, "Luc Domini is a man who desperately needs to prove something to himself, and until he succeeds, everyone and everything else will have to take a back seat to that need."

"Including me?" Thia inquired huskily.

"Yes, my darling daughter. Including you." Denise gave Thia's hand an encouraging pat as she added, "But I expect when all's said and done, you'll find Luc is worth it."

Suddenly Denise got to her feet. "I'd suggest we get back to the table before Luc decides we've deserted him."

Later that night, after Luc drove toward Denise's house, Thia's spirits soared when they said good-night to Denise, and Denise offered her cheek for Luc's kiss. But a few minutes later, her heart sank when she learned that Luc had to leave for Portland the next morning.

"Another board meeting," he explained as he drove through the

soft summer darkness in the direction of the nursery. "We're considering moving the corporate headquarters to Stratford."

"How long will you be gone?" asked Thia.

"It's hard to say."

"Will you be back in time for the dance?"

"Wouldn't miss it." Luc slanted a grin at Thia as he parked near her front door. "I'll see you Saturday for sure."

The rest of his words were inaudible, absorbed by her mouth as he kissed her. But even while he held her in his arms, Thia felt a new distance opening up between them.

\*

FOR REASONS only indirectly connected to Luc's absence, by the time the nursery closed on Wednesday afternoon, Thia wondered how she could possibly survive the week when she wasn't even sure she could survive the next five minutes. First she had to replace the irrigation system. Then the cooler in the greenhouse went out. Now the transmission on the van was acting up.

Thia looked at her engagement ring and thought how ironic it was that Luc should give her a diamond worth a small fortune while, with every passing day, the nursery seemed to move a step closer to bankruptcy. Perhaps the business had already passed the point of no return....

If the bank didn't come through with the loan she applied for, she didn't know where to turn next.

A CARNIVAL atmosphere had overtaken Stratford. Overnight, as if by magic, the streets had sprouted souvenir stands and booths selling corn dogs and hamburgers, cotton candy and soft drinks, pretzels and beer. Jugglers and acrobats, clowns and mimes had found their way into town to entertain the Founders' Day crowds.

Thia closed the nursery early on Saturday. She loaded plants into the loaner van the Chevy garage had provided and drove to the Warwick Inn. With the fountains splashing and the hundreds of miniature lights they had strung through the potted shrubs shining like stars through the foliage, the lily pond would look lovely. Local students stayed on to help Thia rig up the standards for the hanging baskets. Even with their help, however, it was after six o'clock before the last plant was in place. While Thia floated gardenias on the lily pond, the kids cleared away the debris.

The first of the musicians came trooping in with their instruments just as they left the ballroom, and Thia hurried home to grab a bite to eat and change clothes.

She found a note from Celia on the coffee table. "Luc called," it read, and beneath the message was a long row of ditto marks and the hastily penned comment, "Must be love! As you can guess from the number of times he called, he missed you. Says he'll pick you up at eight."

The last line made Thia bolt for the shower, for it was already seven-fifteen.

As it turned out she kept Luc waiting only ten minutes, and when he saw her in her lacy black dress, he seemed to think that she was worth waiting for. His dark eyes glowed with appreciation as he drew her into the warm circle of his arms and kissed her. His mouth settled over hers with an urgency that told her more eloquently than words how much he had missed her during the past week, and she returned his kiss with all of her own pent-up longing.

When the kiss ended, Luc rubbed his cheek against hers and said softly, "We'd better be going, honey. Celia wants us in the receiving line."

THIA and Mickie Lloyd met one another with squeals and hugs, while Austin Cooke and Luc looked on indulgently.

"My golly, look at you!" Mickie cried, her vibrant face wreathed with smiles. "You're gorgeous!"

"You always were good for my ego," Thia laughingly replied.

"It was mutual, kiddo. You believed in me when no one else did. There was a time when you were the only one who didn't make fun of me for wanting to be a singer."

"Well, you've certainly shown all of 'em!" Thia exclaimed. "Will you be singing for us tonight?"

"Try 'n' stop me," said Mickie.  
"Later—"

The band began tuning up just then, cutting short their conversation.

As soon as the dance was under way, they were surrounded by well-wishers and autograph seekers, and now and again Mickie whispered some comment to Austin. Thia recognized that there was quite a lot more than affection between the striking brunette singer and the debonair, eminently distinguished Shakespearean actor.

Austin was at least twenty years Mickie's senior, but there was a kind of tender protectiveness in the way she touched his hand and tipped her head close to his, and when Austin Cooke looked at Mickie, his expression became almost worshipful.

Austin led Mickie onto the dance floor. It was obvious to Thia that, despite the difference in their ages, Mickie was very much in love with Austin Cooke. And it was also obvious that the feeling was mutual.

As he drew Mickie into his arms, Austin looked at her as if she were infinitely precious to him, and Thia experienced a twinge of emotion that felt suspiciously like envy.

Involuntarily, she glanced at Luc. Would he ever love her that much?

He was deeply engrossed in conversation, and from snippets of dialogue she overheard concerning "interest rates" and "amortization" and "return on capital," she assumed the man must be a business associate of Luc's.

After that Thia danced with a lot of old acquaintances.

Finally, when the bandleader introduced Mickie's number, Thia sought Luc out. During the performance, Luc and Thia held hands under the cover of the darkness, and when Mickie sang of lost love and loneliness, Luc's grasp on Thia's hand tightened possessively. Her fingers were numb long before Mickie's song ended.

"Dance with me, Luc," she invited huskily once Mickie had taken her bows and the band was playing a romantic ballad.

Luc smiled sheepishly and let go of her hand. "I wish I could, Thia, but I never learned how to dance."

She wound her arms around his neck and moved her hips in time to the music so that her thighs brushed provocatively against his. She felt him tense and gave him a light, cajoling kiss on the lips. "It's easy," she murmured. "I'll teach you—"

"Some other time," Luc said shortly.

He pulled away from her, and Thia realized she had committed two separate blunders. Not only had she embarrassed Luc by embracing him in public, she had also forced him to admit the gap in his social education. She didn't pursue the issue.

Mickie didn't stay long after she had finished her number. "Come see us tomorrow," Mickie urged Thia. "The Wayfarer. Come by for lunch."

Thia smiled and nodded at her friend, but her smile faded when

Mickie reached Austin Cooke and the actor momentarily leaned upon Mickie as if he hadn't the strength to support himself.

THE FORMAL announcement of Thia and Luc's engagement appeared in Sunday's paper. When Mickie let Thia into the Presidential Suite at the Wayfarer that afternoon, she demanded, "Why the heck didn't you tell me you're getting married? If I'd known, I'd have included your fiancé in my invitation."

Thia threw up her hands to ward off the rolled-up newspaper Mickie was brandishing and replied, "I hardly had the chance to tell you anything last night."

"You're right," Mickie allowed, somewhat mollified. "We didn't have much time last night. But today you're not leaving here till you've told me about Luc Domini."

"That," said Thia, "could take forever."

Mickie tossed the newspaper aside and consulted her dainty, diamond-studded wristwatch. "You'll have to stick to the highlights, because Austin's due back from dress rehearsal at three."

Now it was Thia's turn to cry, "Aha! I thought there was something more than professional courtesy between you and Mr. Cooke."

Mickie didn't blush. She only smiled, but a trace of sadness dimmed the sparkle in her eyes. "Well, we're not ready to go public yet. My fans would have a fit if

they found out we're having an affair, and Austin's fans would think he's gone completely bonkers. But we've been together for almost a year now."

Although Mickie quickly turned away, Thia saw her blink back tears. "It's such a lovely day," Mickie remarked shakily. "I had the waiter set up our table on the balcony. I went ahead and ordered the salmon for both of us. I hope you don't mind." Mickie managed a semblance of a laugh. "You'll never believe this, kiddo, but in certain circles, I'm known as quite a hostess. In the old days I was barely even housebroken."

"No one's a great hostess at twelve."

Mickie led Thia onto the balcony, and for the next two hours Thia answered Mickie's questions about Luc.

"My mother says to give Luc time. She says he has to prove something to himself, but I don't think she realizes how self-contained Luc is. Even when we're alone together, something comes between us. It's as if part of him is holding back, watching and analyzing—"

"Always?" Mickie probed.

"No, not quite always," said Thia. For a moment she was silent. "Maybe it's just that his business comes first with him." Thia stared into her wineglass without really seeing the clear, light rosé. "If only I could be sure he—"

"Listen, girl. Luc and I have certain things in common—such as

having our fathers run out on us. Such as watching someone close to us turn into a lush. Such as growing up on the wrong side of the tracks. Believe me, Thia, it was no picnic. The first lesson a kid had to learn was not to trust anyone."

Mickie swirled the wine in her glass. "By the time I met Austin, I was certain that the only one who gave a damn about me was me. And I was suspicious because Austin was such a gentleman. All he did was treat me like a lady—me! Mickie Lloyd! He even calls me Michelle...."

Thia opened her mouth to comment, but Mickie rushed on. "It took ages, but finally it dawned on me that Austin simply is a gentleman."

Thia nodded thoughtfully. "As long as I'm honest with Luc—"

"That's it," Mickie cried. "Honesty. Even if it hurts. And patience—"

"And lots of loving," Thia finished.

Mickie laughed and topped off the wine in Thia's glass. "Then you'll do okay, kiddo."

They talked about lighter topics after this. Shortly before Austin was due to return, Mickie complimented Thia on the way the ballroom had been decorated and she offered Luc and Thia tickets to Austin's play for opening night. Thia found herself telling Mickie about the nursery's financial woes. The bank had not approved her loan, and she was at her wit's end. The business was running on bor-

rowed time, and she didn't know what to try next.

"Have you discussed this with Luc?" Mickie asked. "He could solve your money problems with one stroke of his trusty pen."

"He could," Thia replied stiffly. "If I asked him to, he probably would. But the cost might be too high."

Mickie looked at her sharply. "You're afraid he'll think you're marrying him for his money."

"Yes—no!" Thia drew in a deep, ragged breath. "I guess what bothers me is that I have no idea what he'd think."

"Are you sure there's not an element of pride involved?"

Before Thia could respond to Mickie's question, they heard the scrape of a key in the lock of the hall door, then the sound of the door opening, closely followed by Austin Cooke's resonant voice call, "Darling, are you decent?"

Her face luminous with happiness, Mickie replied. "Course not, you dope. If you're lucky, I never will be."

Thia made her goodbyes a few minutes later.

"Isn't he sweet?" Mickie said as she accompanied Thia to the elevator. Her eyes were misty with emotion.

Thia arrived home to find a message from Luc waiting for her. Her shoulders drooped dejectedly as she thumbed through the yellow pages searching for the Wayfarer's number.

"It's probably just as well," was Mickie's subdued response. "Since

it's opening night, Austin's likely to be wiped out after the play. Maybe we can work something out for next weekend, though."

They made tentative plans to get together after Austin's play closed the next Saturday.

Mickie said, "I have a recording date in Portland this week, so I'm not going to be here, but I'll leave tickets for you at the box office."

ALTHOUGH LUC was spending yet another week in Portland, even when Thia was hundreds of miles away he couldn't get her out of his mind. In the midst of business meetings she dominated his thoughts, and when he tried to sleep at night, she invaded his dreams.

He became haggard and short-tempered. On Tuesday he had lunch with Mickie Lloyd, and Mickie told him things about Thia's business problems that made him even more irritable. By Thursday even the women in the steno pool had noticed how distracted he was.

In all his calculations, Luc had never foreseen that falling in love would have this effect on him.

AT SATURDAY night's performance, Thia was so distracted by Luc's presence that she gave considerably less than her full attention to the action onstage. She was so keenly aware of him as he lounged into the seat next to hers in the darkened theater that she would not have noticed had Aus-

tin chewed the furniture or turned cartwheels across the stage. She knew that the play had gone well only because of the thunderous applause the audience gave it.

She didn't notice that Austin had not taken his curtain calls along with the rest of the cast until Luc pointed it out to her.

In a speculative undertone that was intended for her ears alone, Luc inquired, "Do you suppose Austin's ill? His final exit was a bit shaky."

Even as he spoke, Luc started moving down the aisle toward the entrance to the wings, towing Thia along in his wake.

Mickie opened the dressing room door to Luc's knock moments later. Her face was white and strained. As she stepped aside and motioned them in, Thia saw that Austin was sprawled on the studio couch.

Austin mumbled something. Mickie rushed to kneel beside the couch.

"What is it, darling? What did you say?"

Austin gave her a tremulous smile. "I said it's time to go home, Michelle."

"Yes, my darling. Right away."

Austin sighed wearily and closed his eyes.

"Does he need a doctor?" Luc asked softly.

"No. No doctor," Mickie answered.

"Have you a car here?"

Mickie nodded gratefully. "Near the loading dock. It's the white Seville." She fumbled through her

purse, found her keycase, and passed it to Luc.

"Thia," he said, "why don't you and Mickie go on ahead in my car. That way you can have Austin's room ready for him—"

Without waiting for her friend's agreement, Thia put one arm around Mickie's shoulders and guided her toward the corridor.

\*

MICKIE ALTERNATELY wept and babbled incoherently during most of the drive to the Wayfarer, but by the time Thia had parked Luc's car in the hotel garage, Mickie had begun to regain her composure. But once she and Thia were alone in the privacy of the Presidential Suite, her frantic pacing betrayed her anxiety anew.

"It's hopeless, Thia. It's a rotten, lousy, can't-win situation."

"What is, Mickie?"

"This—illness of Austin's. ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, creeping paralysis—you can take your pick what to call it, but by any name it's killing Austin, slowly but surely—"

"Oh, Mickie! Are you sure?"

Mickie sagged into a chair. She seemed peculiarly detached as she went on. "Austin was terribly up-front and self-sacrificing about it when we met. As a matter of fact, he tried to talk me out of moving in with him. He warned me that we might not have much time." Mickie pounded the edge of the table with her fist.

"Oh, Mickie." Thia spoke in a cracked whisper as she sank to her

knees in front of her friend. "I wish I could help you. Really help you. Saying I'm sorry isn't enough, and I realize it isn't much comfort, but I am sorry."

Mickie returned the pressure of Thia's fingers. "You probably won't believe this, but the truth is, Austin and I are luckier than most couples. We may not have much time together, but we make every minute count."

Saying this seemed to have a tranquilizing effect on Mickie. She sat quietly in her chair while Thia went into the bedroom, turned down the bedcovers, and located Austin's pyjamas and robe.

"Thanks, kiddo," Mickie said when Thia returned to the living room. "What Austin's going to need now is rest. I was afraid doing the play would be too much for him. I was scared that he wouldn't have the stamina to make it through rehearsals, let alone three performances."

"But he did, Mickie, and he was magnificent."

"He wanted his last performance to be memorable."

Mickie's features were blurred by the tears in Thia's eyes. For a moment both women were silent.

"Austin insists that I have to finish cutting my album, but after that, if I have my way, we'll go to Austin's place near Carmel. We'll admire the sunset in the evening and count the stars at night, and during the day Austin will work on his memoirs and we'll just be together."

She was telling Thia about the sea lions that frolicked in the rockbound cove near Austin's home when Luc and Austin finally arrived. Austin was leaning heavily on Luc's strong supporting arm, but he smiled at Mickie and waved off her assistance when she would have hurried to help him.

"Are you all right?" Mickie inquired anxiously.

"I will be after I've had a chance to rest."

"He needs rest about as much as I need a hole in the head," Luc contradicted Austin with a grin. "He's a hard one to keep in line. On my way back to the hotel, he even tried to talk me into stopping off to see the floor show at Corky's Tavern."

If Luc had thought Mickie would find this story amusing, he was mistaken. She was visibly irritated as she muttered, "Well, of all the—"

"Michelle, dearest," Austin interjected smoothly. "Before you say anything you'll regret, I must point out that it was amateur night. I feel duty bound to offer my encouragement to any aspiring performer."

Austin's smile made him look almost angelic, and Mickie laughed relievedly. "You're incorrigible, Austin."

AS THEY DROVE away from the hotel, Thia was so caught up in her reflections about the evening that she paid scant attention to the route Luc was taking. It was not

until he pulled into the parking lot of Pete's Hideaway that she became aware of her surroundings.

"If it's all the same to you, Luc, I'd rather not have dinner here."

Luc glanced at her as if he understood her reluctance to be with crowds of people; as if he shared it.

"I've heard they have a special picnic supper. How about if I ordered one of those?"

Thia nodded.

He turned and opened his arms to her, and she eagerly went into them. With gentle insistence, his lips moved to her eyelids and tasted the saltiness of tears.

"Mickie's tough, honey." Luc ran his hands over her back in a rhythmic, soothing motion. "She'll be okay. She has lots of inner strength."

"I know she does," Thia murmured hoarsely. "It's just— Oh, Luc, I don't know." Luc drew her closer, as if he would absorb her sudden paroxysm of weeping with his own body. Thia whispered, "I envy them, Luc."

"Envy them! When there are so many things against them? There's the age difference, and they have to be constantly on the lookout for fans, and they're barely a step ahead of the press getting wind of what's going on. And to top it all off he's dying—"

Luc uttered the last word in an abrasive growl. Thia stared at him uncertainly. It was easy enough to admit to herself that she coveted Mickie's closeness to Austin. But how could she say this to Luc

without sounding selfish or critical or, worst of all, self-pitying?

"Still," she said softly, "I envy them."

The wistful tilt of her head revealed more than her reply.

She was not surprised when Luc changed the subject, shifting her thoughts away from Mickie and Austin by saying, "We could take our dinner to the Kirby house."

"You signed the lease?"

"With an option to buy."

"It's a lovely house," she said distantly. "I only wish you'd consulted me about it."

"I did. You went through the house with me."

Thia might have protested that there was a difference between touring the house with him and making a commitment to a year's lease. But the last thing she wanted was to spend their little time together arguing. She smiled, she hoped graciously, and let the matter drop.

THIA SHIVERED with anticipation as she walked with Luc into the Kirby house. Balancing their box supper with one hand, Luc removed two tall candles from the basket. Luc lighted the candles, and they spread out their supper on the moon-dappled carpet in the library.

They sat so close together that their shoulders touched while they sipped Perrier from champagne flutes and sampled pâté and lobster salad and an assortment of cheeses and fresh fruits.

Afterward she lay back against the carpet and pulled him down beside her. She touched the tip of her tongue to his and murmured against his lips, "Hold me, Luc. Love me."

"I do, Thia mia. I will."

Her body soon became a finely tuned instrument of pleasure, hips arching to Luc's caresses, moving restlessly in response to his slightest variation of rhythm. She wound her arms and legs around him and met his hungry demands with her own wild cadence. She lost the essence of herself in the fiery starburst of heat that signaled release, and suddenly she was floating, spinning, cushioned in his arms yet deliciously suspended in space and time.

"Oh, Luc, I wish we could always be like this."

He cupped her chin with his hand and tipped her face toward his. "You'd like us to have more time together, wouldn't you?"

"It's not just the time, Luc," she began slowly. "There's a part of you that I can't touch—"

Luc had already withdrawn emotionally, and now withdrew physically. "You're guilty of the same thing," he said quietly.

She confronted him warily. "How do you mean?"

"When Mickie and I met for lunch last Tuesday, she told me about the problems you're having at the nursery. I had hoped you'd take me into your confidence."

Luc was already tucking his shirttail into the waistband of his slacks. Thia hurriedly stepped into

her dress and struggled with the hard-to-reach zipper.

He spun her around and began untangling the snarl he had created. "I'd never have asked you to marry me if I thought you were a gold digger."

"Why did you ask me to marry you?"

"Because I— Dammit all anyway, Thia! You know how I feel about you."

Thia spun around and stared at him. "D-does that mean you love me?"

"What else would it mean?"

As if to underscore his fast-waning patience, Luc gave the zipper a sharp yank. "I haven't had much experience with sharing my feelings, so it may take a while before I get the hang of it."

"I can wait, Luc, if only you'll let me share my feelings with you." He raised a quizzical eyebrow at her, and she went on. "Sometimes, even if we aren't alone, I'd like to hold hands with you or kiss you—"

Luc silenced her with a kiss. "It's a deal," he agreed huskily, "on one condition. If you'll let me help get the nursery back on its feet financially. I know you see the material things I can give you as a poor substitution for attention—"

"Oh, Luc! Is that how it seems to you?"

Luc had managed to make what should have been a loving commitment sound like a business merger. At least it was a beginning.

LUC SPENT most of the next afternoon at the nursery, going over the books, touring the greenhouse and fields, checking the inventory and inspecting the equipment.

"Well?" she asked anxiously, when he'd finished.

Luc lounged back in his chair. "Your assessment of the situation was right on target. You are undercapitalized. You're going to have to make a sizable investment in new equipment, and to justify that kind of investment, you're going to have to expand your business."

"That's what I told the bank manager, but he wasn't at all impressed."

"I think you have part of the solution right here." Luc tapped the edge of a file folder. "You've had several inquiries about landscaping."

Thia stirred uneasily. "Most of the inquiries came from people who admired the decorations at the Founders' Day Dance. But I don't have the wherewithal to take on full-scale landscaping jobs."

"Let me provide the backing for the machinery—"

"No, Luc," Thia broke in, adamantly shaking her head.

He tossed the folder into the in basket and got to his feet. "You're left with subcontracting the excavating and grading and leveling while you supply the plans, the plants, the contracts, and the know-how."

"Sounds feasible," Thia murmured.

"It is," said Luc. "I know someone for the job. He's recently gone into business for himself, and next week he's going to be working at the inn. I'll ask him to stop by and see you—"

That was as far as Luc got before Thia raced around to his side of the desk and hugged him. Between the fervent kisses she gave him, she cried, "Oh, Luc, I'm so relieved."

On the surface it appeared that their agreement had gotten off to a promising beginning, but they hadn't changed. They were still the same stubborn, strong-willed people, and as summer turned into autumn, it seemed to Thia that in certain respects she and Luc were poles apart.

They had little time together. Even if he hadn't had to travel, the nursery's newly instituted landscaping service required so much of Thia's time. And the occasional free hour she had was given over to helping Celia with redecorating the Kirby house.

Then there were the wedding plans. Ostensibly, Denise had assumed command of those arrangements, but what this amounted to was that she called several times a day to nag Thia about selecting the invitations, the music, the flowers—her mother's list of complaints seemed endless.

After one particularly vitriolic exchange with Denise, Thia told Luc, "This formal wedding is so

complicated. Sometimes I wish we could just elope."

Over the next several weeks, Thia repeated her wish, but Luc never took her seriously.

Luc rarely came to the house empty-handed. He brought Thia perfume, a topaz pendant, a costly leather handbag. Luc continued to shower her with small but expensive presents. She thanked him by showering him with affection in public.

In early September he invited Thia to accompany him to Portland for the quarterly meeting of his board of directors. He didn't bring her a gift when he picked her up for the drive to the airport, and she rewarded him by behaving with ladylike decorum while he showed her through Domini Developers' corporate headquarters and introduced her to the office staff and board members.

God, she loved him so much! And in a moment of blinding insight, she understood if needing him had made her feel that she was opening herself to the pain of rejection, needing her must make him feel exquisitely vulnerable.

It was late that evening, when Thia and Luc returned to the nursery, that Thia learned that the trip to Portland had been a diversionary action. Luc had lured her away from home, and he'd arranged, without her knowledge or consent, to have the house painted in her absence.

Celia ran onto the porch and waved a greeting to them. "Isn't this a lovely surprise?" she cried.

The silence became conspicuous as Thia started toward the front door.

Celia said uneasily, "For heaven's sake, Thia, aren't you going to thank Luc?"

Thia stopped in the doorway, but she didn't turn around. Her spine was so rigid that every line of her body conveyed outrage and injured pride. "I give you my word that eventually I'll think of an appropriate way to thank him."

On that chilly note, without so much as glancing in Luc's direction, Thia marched into the house.

She heard him say good-night to Celia and before the soft growl of the engine had disappeared down the drive, Celia stormed along the hall to Thia's bedroom.

Celia glared at her and cried, "Luc Domini is the best thing that ever happened to you and you're doing your best to blow it."

"Stay out of this, Celia," Thia responded shortly. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell I don't! You're forgetting I've been there. Do you think I learned nothing from my marriage?" Celia paused for breath. "There are no perfect people in this world, but Luc's close, and if you'd stop crying for the moon, maybe—just maybe—you'd realize that you've already got a ticket to paradise."

Having spoken her mind, Celia turned on her heel and stalked along the hall to her room, and Thia made no move to stop her. She acknowledged the elements of truth in Celia's accusations.

THIA DID apologize, and Luc accepted her apology. But for the next two weeks, he was in Portland most of that time, and although he telephoned almost every night, long distance proved to be a poor substitute for being with him.

By October first, however, Thia was ready to put her plan into operation. She had ordered a gift from the same jeweler who had sold Luc her engagement ring, and she had agonized over the inscription.

The Kirby house was ready too. The new appliances had been installed, making the kitchen a gastronome's dream, and the master bedroom was sumptuously decorated in a modified Art Deco style, all rounded corners and flowing lines and spaciousness.

On the second Saturday in October, Luc stopped by the nursery on his way from the airport to the inn.

"Do you know what day this is?" he asked

"The thirteenth—"

Luc folded her body to his with breathtaking ardor. "If things had been different, it might have been our wedding day."

Before she left Luc to offer assistance to a customer who had suddenly invaded their trysting place, Thia inquired huskily, "Are you going to be in town for a while?"

"Just for tonight, I'm afraid," Luc answered roughly. "I have a meeting in Salem tomorrow morning—"

"I see." Thia wanted to weep with disappointment. She decided she could not wait any longer, and hastily suggested, "Let's have dinner at the house this evening."

Luc's gaze moved over her face. "It's a date," he said.

As he turned to leave, she added, "And, Luc, bring your toothbrush."

Luc's only answer was a roguish grin, but it spoke volumes.

SHE BEGAN to have second thoughts while she gift wrapped Luc's present. Would he understand that the gift was her way of saying that she would meet him halfway—more than halfway? Would he think she'd been inspired or simply an extravagant fool when she'd chosen to spend hundreds of dollars on a golden key with an acrylic tag? Was the inscription too sentimental? Was it silly? Dear Lord! What if he laughed at her?

When she heard his car in the drive, her courage completely deserted her. She grabbed the package, ran upstairs, and hid it beneath a pillow on the bed. She felt like the world's worst coward as she hurried back to the foyer to meet Luc, but the moment he opened the door, she forgot her cowardice.

He held up his toothbrush as if it were his ticket of admission.

She would have run to his arms, but he held her a small distance away from him.

"You're wearing the perfume I gave you," he said at last, "and the necklace."

Thia stroked the topaz pendant with loving fingers. "I never thanked you properly for this, Luc, but it's beautiful."

Thia went onto her tiptoes and melted into his embrace. She traced the outline of his ear with the tip of her tongue.

Luc groaned outright and hauled her close.

With a sexy sidelong glance at Luc, Thia stepped away from him. "What about dinner?"

"What about starting with an appetizer?"

He swept her off her feet and into his arms, gathering her possessively close and cradling her against his chest. As he strode down the hall, Thia pouted up at him, pretending to be offended.

"Is an appetizer all I am to you?"

"Thia, you know damned well you're a veritable ten-course banquet."

He deposited her in the fading square of sunlight at the center of the bed, and she lay where she had landed, holding her arms up to him.

"Luc," she sighed. "Have you any idea how much I love you?"

As he sank back against the pillows, she strove to define the dimensions of her love for him with her warm mouth and eager hands, with questing fingers and seeking tongue, with whispered endearments and the tantalizing press of

her soft flesh against his hardness. She cherished every inch of him.

At last Luc's hard-won control snapped. He cried her name harshly, then again with entreaty. And she gave him what he wanted with a delectable eroticism that drove him to the brink of rapture again and again, then brought the release of a shattering climax that touched his very soul.

They did not get around to eating the dinner Thia had so lovingly prepared. They lay with their limbs entwined, too contented to move; and gradually, with Luc still inside her, they drifted into sleep.

THE SOFT GRAY light of dawn had filtered into the bedroom when Thia felt the mattress dip.

"I'm sorry," he said, bending down to kiss the corner of her mouth. "My plane leaves in an hour and a quarter."

"What time is it now?"

"Almost five forty-five."

She touched his cheek and smoothed back the unruly lock of dark hair that had fallen across his brow. "Can't you stay a few minutes longer?"

His gaze left her face. Although he had to be at the airport by seven, he made love to her as if time had ceased to exist.

Thia was sleeping when he finally left the house, and when she awoke for the second time that morning, the pattern of light and shadow in the bedroom told her that it must be close to eight o'clock. She opened her eyes reluctantly and stretched, luxuriat-

ing in the bone-deep contentment that pervaded her body. But her euphoria was short-lived.

The present! She leaped out of bed, pulling the pillows with her, flinging them away and stripping the blankets and sheets off the mattress. But the present was gone and Luc was gone.

Dear Lord! He would open it on his own. She would not be there to explain.

The telephone rang, startling her. She stared at it dumbly.

"Hello, Thia," he said when she finally worked up the courage to answer.

"Wh-where are you?" she stammered. "Are you calling from Salem?"

"No," Luc answered without inflection. "As a matter of fact, I'm in Stratford."

"Stratford? But why? Did you miss your plane?"

"Not exactly. The truth is, I changed my mind about the trip. I guess you could say something more important came up."

Thia wondered what could be more important to Luc than his meeting, and she dreaded the possibility that it was her gift. Before she could ask, Luc spoke again.

"I'm calling from the Copper Kettle Café on the plaza, and I thought maybe you'd like to join me here for breakfast. I opened my present."

Suddenly Thia's hands were slippery with perspiration. "And?" she prompted feebly.

"I read the inscription," Luc replied.

In her mind's eye Thia saw the ornate tracery of Gothic letters on the clear plastic, and even as the message she had composed sprang sharply into focus, Luc began reciting the inscription.

"My love's not for sale—  
you can't buy it.  
It's yours for the taking—  
And just for a start,  
here's the key to my heart:  
Say you love me—  
or if you can't say it,  
imply it."

The silence between them was deafening.

It was Luc who ended it. "Thia," he said softly, "I just wondered— That is, I get the impression—"

After these uneasy starts, Luc hesitated. Thia heard his deep intake of breath, and when he went on, a hint of shyness had crept into his voice.

"What I want to ask is, have you changed your mind about our bargain? I mean, have you switched sides?"

"Yes, my darling," she cried. "Oh, yes! I've switched to our side."

Luc's low-pitched laughter seemed to indicate that this was the answer he'd hoped to hear.

"How soon can you get here?" he asked.

"Give me ten minutes," she replied. "Maybe less."

LUC WAS waiting for her just inside the dining room, and after one

look at his face, she knew that the key had won his trust. The way he held out his arms to her said this more clearly than words, and he looked younger, happier, more carefree than he ever had, even when they were in high school.

At first he simply held her, and then he pressed an envelope into her hand.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Open it and see."

She found that the envelope contained a pair of tickets on that afternoon's excursion to Reno. She stared at the tickets, shaking her head with disbelief.

"I was at the airport and I saw this travel poster for Nevada, and I got to thinking that it's too nice a day to spend in some stuffy office." Luc smiled self-consciously and shuffled his feet, but his arms about her tightened as he said, "If you'd still like to elope, we could get married in Reno."

Miraculously, before the sound of his voice had died away, he kissed her. Right in front of the waitresses and busboys and fry cooks, not to mention the entire breakfast crowd that frequented the Copper Kettle Café, Luc kissed her. A tender kiss. A loving kiss. A lover's kiss.

It was a long time before he released her, and when he did, under the cover of the whistles and applause their audience gave them, he told her, "I love you, Thia mia, more than I can say. I always have and I always will."

His whispered declaration of love was barely audible, but she sensed that part of him wanted to shout it from the middle of Main Street so that all of Stratford could hear. And as he led her to their table by the windows, he smiled at her, and she knew that finally, irrevocably, Luc Domini had come home.

**ABOUT TO MOVE?** Write your new address below and send it to us with the address label from your current World's Best Romances—eight weeks before you move.

(Please print in ink)

ACCOUNT NUMBER \_\_\_\_\_

MRS. \_\_\_\_\_

MISS. \_\_\_\_\_

MS. \_\_\_\_\_

FIRST NAME

INITIAL

LAST NAME

ADDRESS

APT.

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

ZIP CODE

MAIL TO: Harlequin World's Best Romances,  
P.O. Box 11233, Des Moines, IA 50340-1233

# STAR SIGNS—SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER

---



## VIRGO August 23–September 22

Take time out to relax—you could have been overdoing it. And until your energy levels get back to normal, you should avoid any unnecessary stress. Fortunately, partners should be in a more caring mood than of late, so sit back and let them do some pampering. It could be fun!



## LIBRA September 23–October 22

There are indications of changes in your life mainly connected to your career, and there may also be an opportunity to travel. Socially, too, this is a lucky phase and you should feel in the mood to make the most of it.



## SCORPIO October 23–November 22

A new era is opening for you, and if you make the most of all on offer, you could have a dynamic and exciting time. A new romance continues to blossom, giving you a real lift, and you can rightfully look forward in a positive way.



## SAGITTARIUS November 23–December 22

There may be a few harsh decisions to be made in order to finally clear the path forward. Finances need to be handled carefully, and read all the small print in any contract, or you may take on more than you can deal with. Letters of importance boost your confidence and toward the end of September you should feel you have made real progress.



## CAPRICORN December 23–January 22

Yours is one of the most hardworking signs of the zodiac and your efforts should be noticed during this phase; there could well be a financial bonus. Close relationships could be a little strained. Maybe you have been a touch neglectful; a moonlit dinner or a surprise trip may help you get back some of the missing magic.



## AQUARIUS January 23–February 22

A cool head and a positive smile will be needed as those around you seem to be acting in a strange manner. Try some straight talking. They may welcome the chance to thrash out any problems they are having. Toward the end of September, life should become more harmonious and any travel plans are well aspected, as, too, are finances.

*STAR SIGNS (continued)*

---

## PISCES February 23–March 22



You can be immensely philosophical and you should apply this ability to understand the changes you are going through. Mid-September, a new direction could open up, and with the help of those around you, the move could be beneficial. A financial boost toward the end of the month puts you in the party mood.

## ARIES March 23–April 22



A happy and fulfilling time in prospect, with the only down moments happening around the second week of September when your bed of roses could produce a few thorns. Friends may be in need of some support, and if their demands become too much, take a short break to restore your energy levels.

## TAURUS April 23–May 22



Finances may need sorting; try to act quickly rather than ignore the situation. That way, any problems can be sorted more effectively. A surprise visitor toward the end of September could see you thinking in an entirely new way.

## GEMINI May 23–June 22



Emotions could run high as your passions rise. Count to ten before acting, as sometimes you can be guilty of overreacting. Communicate but don't dictate your feelings and the response could be pleasing. A letter or phone call that brings news of a family celebration raises your spirits toward the end of the month.

## CANCER June 23–July 22



An excellent time for relaxing or taking a holiday. Partners seem pleasantly responsive and generally the period should be easygoing with little to disrupt the calm. Any new projects started now are also well aspected, as, too, are hobbies and new interests.

## LEO July 23–August 22



It is a time to be decisive and take action for yourself rather than moaning about your lot to all and sundry. If others see you taking action, they will be more responsive and may offer the help you felt you deserved in the first place. Career moves toward the end of the month could lead to an improvement in your finances.

**TAKE A WALK ON THE  
DARK SIDE OF LOVE WITH**

*Silhouette®*



# **SHADOWS**

**'93**

October is the shivery season, when chill winds blow and shadows walk the night. Come along with us into a haunting world where love and danger go hand in hand, where passions will thrill you and dangers will chill you. Silhouette's second annual collection from the dark side of love brings you three perfectly haunting tales from three of our most bewitching authors:

**Kathleen Korbel  
Carla Cassidy  
Lori Herter**

Haunting a store near you this October.

Only from



*Silhouette®*

where passion lives.

SHAD93

COMING IN FUTURE ISSUES OF

HARLEQUIN®  
WORLD'S BEST

# Romances

## IF YOU LOVE ME • Joan Smith

TIS THE SEASON... Christmas was supposed to be a happy time. For Robin Halton, however, returning home for the holidays only conjured up dreams of what might have been if she hadn't broken her engagement to Sean Blake and left town, never to look back. But Sean knew that with luck Robin could soon be back in his life. What she needed was a little push...right under the mistletoe.

## A SECRET VALENTINE • Dixie Browning

HE WAS THE LAST MAN ON EARTH SHE COULD TRUST... Now that her life was finally well-ordered and sensible, Grace Spencer was determined that no man would ever take advantage of her again. She certainly didn't need Quinn Donovan with his insolent smile and devastating reputation with women. Everything about Quinn irritated her. He was too big, too uncouth, too... too attractive.

Look for these stories  
*and many more in*  
future issues!

# READER'S CORNER

## CROSSWORD #14

## ACROSS

1. Hairy coat
4. Fish-cake fish
7. Wrongdoing
10. Watch the  
birdie
11. \_\_\_ and cry
12. Brag
14. Zone
15. Knack
16. Ascend
17. Instruction
19. Rubbed out
21. Stable morsel
22. Loving \_\_\_
23. Winks
26. Tried out
30. Ventilate
31. A Gardner
32. Belittled
36. Separated
39. \_\_\_ and  
feather
40. Freezer  
output
41. Mansion  
grounds
44. Decide
48. Plunder
49. Deed
51. Golf club
52. Destiny
53. Pasture sound
54. Tear

### 55. Angry color

56. Coin of Peru  
57. Needle hole

DOWN

1. Golfer's cry
2. Manipulates
3. Cause
4. Intones
5. Belonging to  
    us
6. Discover
7. Food
8. Spring flower
9. Win by a

### 10. Close friend

### 13. Join in marriage

- 18. Stout tree
- 20. Regret.

23. Dracula, at  
times

- 24. Whopper
- 25. A Gershwin

- 27. Make lace
- 28. Adam's

100 MARCH 2000

half

### **34. Have dinner**

### 35. Night visions

36. Revolver  
37. Expert

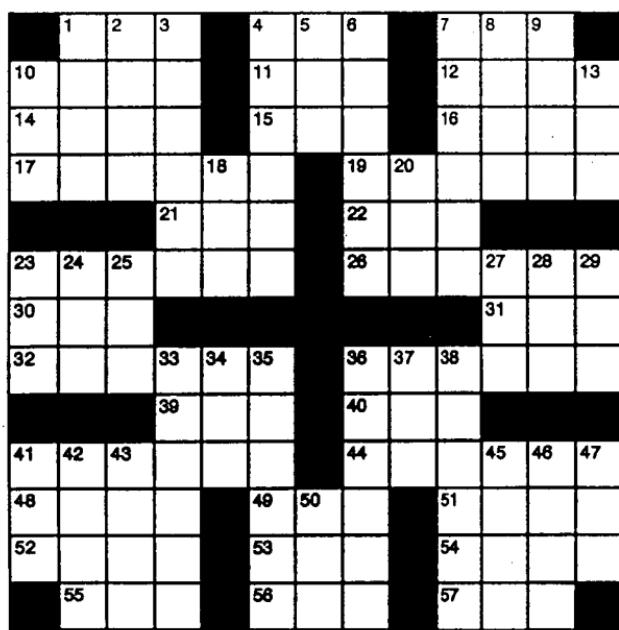
38. Go to bed  
41. Santa's

helper  
42 Fly aloft

43. Carry  
45. Three-spot

**46. Solitary**

50. Bill and \_



From Good Time Crosswords, copyright © 1991 by Penny Press, Inc., America's leading publisher of fine puzzle magazines. Used by permission.

HARLEQUIN®  
WORLD'S BEST

# Romances

## DEBBIE MACOMBER—Adam's Image

To all the world, Susan McKenzie, successful romance editor, seemed to be the perfect heroine. But there was one thing missing in her life, and that was the perfect hero. Then she met Dr. Adam Gallagher. He seemed to fit the role perfectly. But Adam didn't seem to want to play the hero's role!

## JENNIFER GREENE—Body and Soul

Plenty of Claire's patients fainted at the sight of a needle, but none of them had ever managed to unnerve her the way Joel did. For as soon as she felt him falling into her arms, Claire knew this man was going to be more trouble than the average emergency room admission. And trouble was exactly what Joel had in mind!

## SUZANNE CAREY—Kiss and Tell

With his rugged good looks, smoky blue eyes and easy charm, Tom Courtenay had captured her heart in an instant. Within hours Jenna was surrendering to his lovemaking. But then she found out that "Tom Courtenay" was really Duke Tyrell. She tried to convince herself that his fiery embraces were part of the same lie. But one night, under the moonlit sky, she felt her resistance melt....

## ROBIN FRANCIS—Season of Dreams

It was ironic that the Stratford, Oregon, Centennial Celebration was to be held at the Warwick Inn. The old hotel had been purchased by Domini Developers and was to be decorated by Sommers Nurseries. Thia Sommers and Luc Domini had both fled the town after high school. But Thia had returned...and now it seemed Luc had come back for her!